



The Mythical Hero's



Author: Tatematsuri
Illustrator: Ruria Miyuki

Otherworld Chronicles





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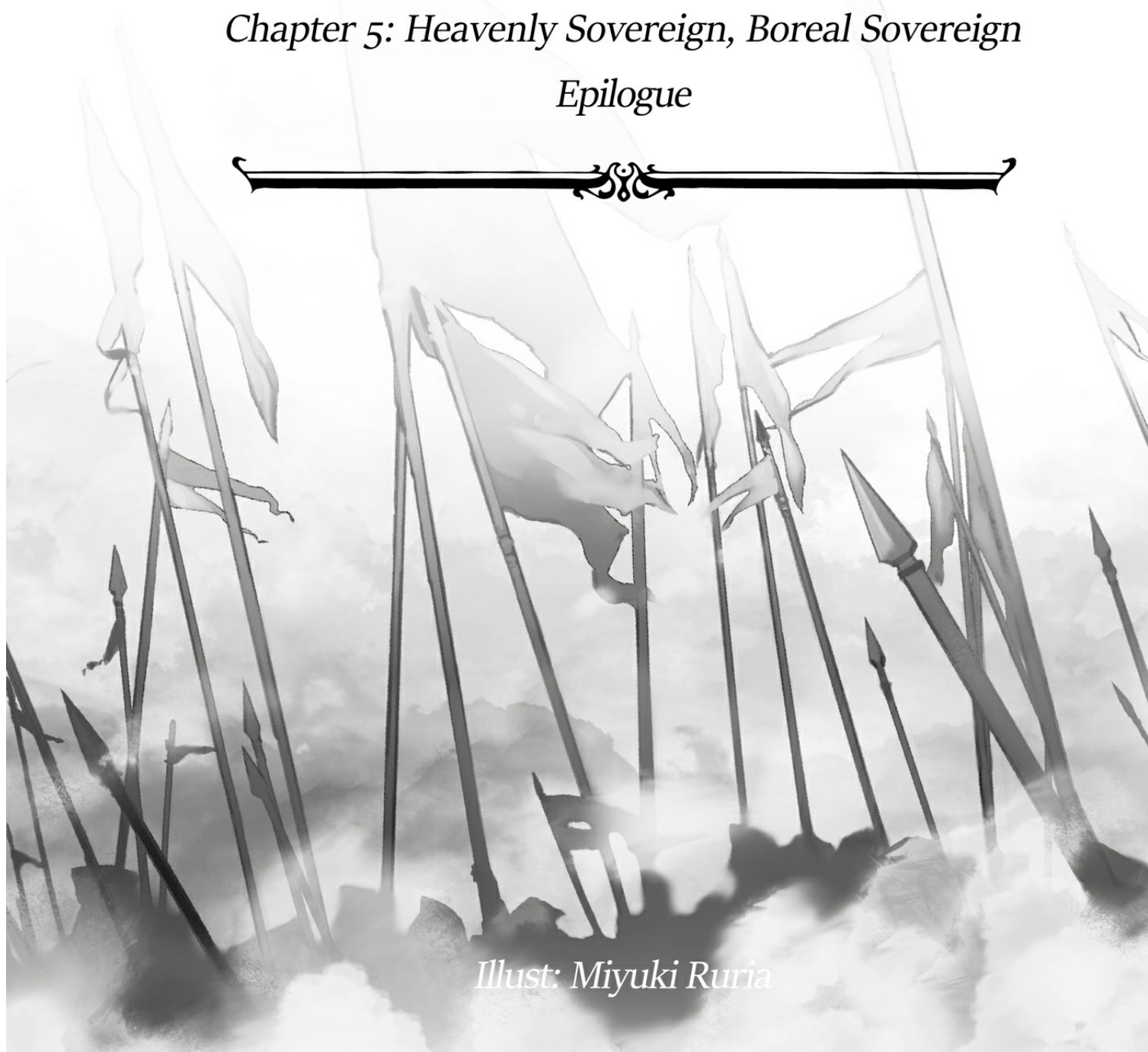
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Illust: Miyuki Ruria

Prologue

A sickening number of corpses littered the battlefield. Black smoke spiraled heavenward from blasted trees to blot out the sky. The tang of smoldering rust filled the air.

“Yaaah!”

Across that vision of hell danced a crimson-haired girl. With each twirl, she scattered the lingering death-stench; with each leap, she swung to rend the nightmare in twain. Her every slash birthed cries of pain, of anger, and of every imaginable kind of malice. Yet no matter how many soldiers she cut down, no matter how high the bodies piled, there was no end to her despair. Breathing raggedly, she thrust her burning blade into the earth.

“So this is how it feels to truly have your back against the wall.”

She looked around, but there was not a friendly face in sight. Their retreat had long been cut off. Her retinue had stood with her to the last, but they had died to a man. Now, with her strength all but spent, she had little hope of escaping the circle closing around her.

As her vision blurred with blood, she raised her eyes to the sky and set her jaw with determination.

“But I can’t give up. I swore to him that I’d see him again.”

Her fingers found their grip on the hilt once more as she remembered the promise she had made to the black-haired boy. The next time they met, she would show him how much she had grown. This she had vowed. She would not falter here. She could not.

The tip of her crimson blade swiped sideways, warning the encroaching enemies away.

“Come on, then. This isn’t where I die.”

If they cut off her arms, she would stumble. If they took her legs, she would

crawl. But she would reach him, one way or another. She would return to where he waited and see him smile again.

Wilfully, valiantly, she raised her sword and looked her foes in the eyes.

“I’ll be all right. This isn’t the end!”

His face flashed through her mind, and with a smile, she launched herself forward—into the forest of spears and beyond, to him. Her crimson eyes burned with unwavering resolution as she plunged into the oncoming horde. She hardly needed to look where she was swinging; her strikes would have struck home even if she were blind. A single slash sent blood spraying across the plain. Screams rose skyward. Her sword blazed bright to reflect her will, its scarlet blade spewing hellfire.

As she tore through the soldiers, a new arrival to the battle caught her attention. She stopped.

“Eh?”

Drums beat from all around. The enemy ranks hummed with anticipation. Their cheers shook the earth and their stamping resounded in her very guts. The sea of men parted, and out from the breach stepped a female knight.

“I applaud your tenacity,” the woman called out, “even in the face of defeat.” Her voice rang clear and true through the roars around them. “But you are only one against many. The time has come to end this performance.”

With a smile as demure as a saint’s, she brandished her azure spear in a deft one-handed spin. Its passing shattered the earth. Every flourish sent out a shock wave, whipping up dust and rocks around her. So overwhelming was her presence that the air itself strained under its weight.

“Eyes straight. Don’t look away.”

A muffled *boom* shook the air.

“Or you will die.”

All at once, the knight was hardly a rue away. The crimson-haired girl raised her blade in a hurried guard, but even blocked, the impact blasted through her body.

“Agh!”

“Good,” the woman said. “But you have erred even so.”

Too late, the girl noticed the savage chill that clawed at her skin, felt the glacial wind from the speartip grating against her guard. Her eyes widened as her burning blade began to freeze over.

“You think so, do you?!” She sank forward, thrusting her opponent away, and swung with all her might. “Well, I’ll show you!”

No matter how stout her heart, no matter how noble her resolve, being forced onto the back foot took its toll on her swordsmanship. Even so, she fought valiantly. The chill issuing from the azure spear froze the sweat on her forehead, and her lips split until they bled, but she pressed onward.

“You fight well. But you will go no farther.”

“Ngh!”

It was a single breath that undid her, a brief disconnect between one strike and the next. Her lovely features twisted in pain as the spear sliced through her flesh.

“Guh!”

The spear struck again, this time punching through her shoulder. A gout of blood sprayed behind her.

“Now you are done.”

The knight planted her spear in the ground and raised a hand. The enemy troops surged forward, scrambling to take their chance while they had it. The girl’s crimson sword flared, sensing danger, but the azure spear’s chill dispersed its light.

“Not yet... I’m not...”

A fierce will still burned in her eyes, but she had no cards left to play, no means of defending herself against the storm of violence.

“Hiro...”

As her enemies fell on her, she reached out for the boy’s hand, but no hope

blessed her and she was swallowed by the press.

Chapter 1: Dawn of Strife

Golden leaves spiraled down to rest on the cobblestones, signaling the coming of fall. Wind rippled through the branches, sending the leaves rustling like tiny voices protesting the cold. The rhythms of nature hung thick in the air.

The road passing through the idyllic scene was called the Schein High Road. The name came from its builders, House Schein, one of the five great houses in the early days of the Grantzian Empire. Now, it was managed by the state, with stations erected at set intervals along its length, but traffic was sparse at this early hour and only a handful of stagecoaches were running.

A four-horse carriage barreled along the tranquil road at top speed. In the front seat, an olive-skinned woman kept a deft command of the reins.

“The capital’s in sight, Your Lordship!” she shouted as the carriage struck a stone and pitched wildly.

The woman’s name was Huginn. Once a sellsword in the Duchy of Lichtein, she had served for a time as an aide in the Liberation Army. Now, she put her martial skills to use in Hiro’s service.

“Good. Take us up to the palace.”

Hiro only gave a brief reply. His normally kind features were still and forbidding. He pressed a hand to his chest and breathed deep in a bid to calm his pounding heart.

I won’t achieve anything by panicking. First, I need to see the emperor and find out what’s going on.

The matter at hand was the fate of Liz and Aura, who had gone missing in action in Faerzen. A week had passed since Drix had delivered the grim news in Lebering. More would be known by now. It was possible that the pair were already safe and sound, although the rational part of Hiro’s mind doubted that things would be that easy.

“Surely there is no cause for concern, Your Highness,” said Drix from the seat

beside him. “Lady Celia Estrella has her Spiritblade and Brigadier General von Bunadala is one of the finest strategists in the empire.”

The man’s reassurances did not provide much comfort. Hiro only nodded in reply. He knew that Drix was acting out of compassion, but if he opened his mouth, he felt that he might snap.

“Cargo inspection, Your Lordship,” came Huginn’s voice from the front. Hiro looked up to see her peering through the now-open driver’s window.

“Understood. I’ll do the talking.”

He stood up from the sofa and cast a glance out of the side window. The carriage was passing over the bridge into the imperial capital. The road was heaving with people of all stripes and trades: commonfolk from nearby towns, brutish-looking sellswords, merchants from other nations grinning in anticipation of impending profits. All were bound for the great gate in the city walls where guards inspected their belongings. A travel pass or some other kind of documentation was required to enter.

“You there! Halt! From where do you hail?”

A group of several guards flagged the carriage down. Their cautious stares and imposing attitude would have been more than enough to intimidate any ordinary traveler. Wary of causing a stir, Hiro had refrained from displaying any livery, but that only seemed to make them more suspicious. They had his vehicle surrounded in seconds.

“Don’t worry,” he said, leaning out of the window. “I’m not a threat.”

The eyes of the man who seemed to be in charge grew impossibly wide at the sight of his face.

“I guess that means you recognize me,” Hiro said. “Good. Will His Majesty’s signature get me through?”

He produced a letter stamped with the imperial seal and waved it. The chief inspector paled.

“F-Forgive me, Lord Schwartz!”

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than he stood bolt upright and

gave a stiff bow. The people around him heard, and within seconds the crowd was in uproar. The situation quickly turned dangerous. The nearby soldiers fought to push the spectators back, but they strained forward to surround the carriage, desperate to catch a glimpse of Hiro.

“I was hoping to get to the palace discreetly. I’m in something of a hurry.”

He pointed to the carriage roof, drawing attention to his deliberate lack of livery. The chief inspector realized what he was driving at and looked around at the crowd.

“My apologies, Your Highness. I’ll clear this up right away.” With sweat beading on his forehead, the chief inspector turned around and waved to attract the crowd’s attention. “Nothing to see here!” he shouted. “Only a look-alike! There’s no Lord Schwartz, just a band of traveling players!”

The man’s improvisation sounded slightly desperate, but it wasn’t bad for a spur-of-the-moment excuse. In any case, the people seemed to swallow it. They returned to the inspection queue, grumbling about wasting their time.

“Sorry for the bother, sirs!” the chief inspector continued. “Let this carriage through! We’ve caused them enough trouble!”

His subordinates forced their way into the crowd and pushed them back, clearing a path for the carriage. As they set off once more, Hiro turned to look out of the back window. The chief inspector was bowing furiously behind them, his face dreadfully pale—probably in anticipation of some kind of punishment. He had only been doing his duty. Hiro wasn’t the kind of person to take offense over that.

I’ll have to send a messenger later to thank him for a job well done.

Whatever the case, the incident had expedited their passage through the gate. Beyond lay the central boulevard. In spite of the early hour, the roadside stalls were already bustling with people—noblewomen clad in fine silks, scholars gathering around imported pottery, cooks sampling spices of all hues, children swarming to the smell of frying meat. The crisis in Faerzen seemed to be the last thing on the city’s mind.

I assumed the palace was suppressing news of whatever happened, but

perhaps I was jumping to conclusions.

It seemed more likely that the news had simply yet to arrive. Any concrete information would have spread through the city like wildfire. There were no locks for the people's mouths. Even regarding events beyond the western territories, the number of foreign merchants passing through the capital would render an information blackout next to impossible.

Word will spread sooner or later. If not today, then tomorrow or the day after.

The Warmaiden and the Valditte commanded incredible popularity in the capital. If the commonfolk learned that they had been defeated, popular sentiment would pitch toward warmongering.

And the winners in that case will be the foreign nations waiting for the empire to show signs of weakness. We can't let Faerzen distract us from the bigger picture.

If they didn't put down the Faerzen Resistance immediately, the collapse of the west would be unavoidable, and that would put paid to any ambitions of unifying Soleil.

I wonder what the emperor's plotting...

Hiro looked out of the window to take his mind off things. The carriage had passed beneath the statues of the Divines that watched over the central boulevard and was crossing the fountain plaza beyond. From there, it was a straight shot north to the austere shadow of the imperial palace of Venezyne.

"Muninn."

"Something you need, chief?"

The scar-faced man opposite straightened in his seat. He was Muninn, the elder brother of Huginn, who was handling the reins. Both had taken part in a slave uprising in Lichtein three months prior, where Muninn had served as a lieutenant to the Liberation Army's commander, Garda Meteor. Like the rest of the rebels, he had come under Hiro's wing after their defeat at the hands of the Fourth Legion.

"While I'm meeting with the emperor, could you head to the eastern quarter

and find out what the Knights of the Golden Lion are up to?"

A central rose garden partitioned the sprawling palace complex into four quarters. The eastern one hosted the barracks and training grounds of the Knights of the Golden Lion, the First Legion's elite troops. To the south was the tightly guarded entrance, all watchtowers and guard outposts; to the north, the palace of Venezyne itself, the beating heart of the empire; and to the west, a residential district where the most powerful noble families kept their estates.

"I'll see it done." Muninn gave a firm nod. Although normally an easygoing sort, his flippant attitude evaporated when he was assigned serious responsibilities.

"And Drix, I have a job for you too."

"Your will is my command, Your Highness."

"I want you to find out what First Prince Stovell is up to. If you can't get close to the man himself, ask around about his recent activities. I'll take any scraps you can find."

"As you wish."

"I'll see you both later. Good luck."

"Yes, Your Highness!" they chorused.

With that, Hiro opened the door and stepped out of the carriage.

"What about me, Your Lordship?" a voice asked.

The question came from Huginn. She seemed confused, either peeved by or concerned about having been left out.

"You stay here and watch the carriage. You've driven us all the way from Lebering. You deserve a break."

"Watch the carriage?" she repeated, as though not quite understanding.

"That's right. If you're going to work for me, you need to keep yourself in peak condition. I want you to rest until I get back."

Muninn and Drix were already splitting off to attend to their respective duties. Huginn stared after them resentfully for a moment before sighing in

resignation and turned back to Hiro.

“Carriage-watching it is, then. If you think that’s best.” She nodded in begrudging acceptance.

“Good. Don’t worry, I won’t be long.”

Waving to her over his shoulder, Hiro set out toward the palace. As he ascended the spotless steps of the flagstone stairs, a magnificent set of doors came into view. Fierce-looking guards stood on either side. They greeted him with a bow.

“Welcome, Lord Hiro Schwartz. Chancellor Graeci awaits you.”

As Hiro drew closer, they opened the doors in unison. The fragrant air contained within filtered out, bathing him in warmth. The scent of the timeworn structure calmed the heart, just like it had one thousand years ago. Hiro smiled as he stepped inside. It was hard not to feel nostalgic.

I have a lot of memories here. It feels like coming home.

A large crowd awaited him inside. At their head was Chancellor Graeci, surrounded by officials whom Hiro assumed must be advisors.

“Lord Hiro Schwartz,” the aged man said. “Your presence has been sorely missed.”

“It’s been too long, Chancellor.”

With greetings exchanged, Graeci turned aside and inclined his head. “You may proceed to the throne room. His Majesty awaits.”

“Thank you.”

At Graeci’s ushering, Hiro continued onward. The chancellor fell in behind him, and his aides followed. The group was large enough that their footsteps echoed down the passage. Hiro wondered at the need for the escort, but his question was soon answered.

“A petition from the citizens of the central territories, my lord. They claim that they are being unfairly taxed, but the house responsible is a relative of House Krone...”

“Caution the perpetrators in my name. Firmly. A civil uprising is the last thing we can afford in times like these.”

“My lord, the heir to House Nikkel requests an audience with His Majesty.”

“Burn it. Nothing he could say will change his house’s punishment. Don’t pester me with such trifles.”

“A northern noble claims to have discovered a new vein of ore, my lord, but it lies in a gorge filled with monsters. He requests that the crown foot a portion of the expenses for the extermination.”

“What imbecile wrote this report? There’s hardly anything here. Send a messenger and bring me the man in person.”

As they walked, the officials handed reports to Graeci for him to issue appropriate responses.

“You must excuse me, Lord Hiro,” the chancellor said. “I realize that this is no place for matters of state.”

“There’s nothing to excuse. I don’t think I’ve heard anything I shouldn’t have.”

Hiro’s welcome must have been crammed into a very busy schedule. The chancellor was being hounded by his duties even as they walked. It was not hard to guess why. With the situation in Faerzen taking precedence, a lot of matters must have been left unattended. Normally, addressing such problems was exactly what these aides were for, but all of the cases that Hiro had overheard required difficult judgment calls that they likely couldn’t make on their own.

Still, Chancellor Graeci’s schedule was the least of Hiro’s concerns.

“I’ve heard that Aura is cut off behind enemy lines, while Liz was driven back by a Draali force. Is that true?”

“To the best of our knowledge, yes. It seems that Lady Celia Estrella was riding to Brigadier General von Bunadala’s aid when she was caught in a Draali ambush. Of course, it is hard to know exactly what happened, but...”

Growing impatient with the methodical explanation, Hiro hurried the chancellor to the point. “Are they safe?”

“Brigadier General von Bunadala has taken refuge in a nearby fort, where she remains. As for Lady Celia Estrella...regrettably, she appears to have been taken captive by Draal.”

Hiro fell silent, sensing the weight in the man’s words, but his knowledge and experience immediately went to work devising plans. How could he achieve the best outcome? What would saving Liz take? If the grand duchy was keeping her captive, he could prepare a suitable ransom, but if the Faerzen Resistance were the ones holding her, they would probably demand more than he could give. Their most likely demand would be for the empire to retreat from Faerzen entirely, but the emperor would be unwilling to give up his hard-won conquest. That would put Liz’s life in danger.

Another approach, then. He could seek out elements in Faerzen who were disaffected with the Resistance and bring them down from within...but that would require a lot of time and effort, neither of which he had.

This is bad.

Scheme after scheme fell apart in his mind. With each failure, he searched more desperately for another, but it did not take long for him to realize that none of the knowledge he had cultivated was of any use.

Well, I do still have one idea. My first one. But that’s risky at best.

The plan in question was designed for a scenario where Liz had managed to escape. Now that she was in the enemy’s clutches, it would only put her in danger.

Hiro felt himself growing more and more trapped, like an insect caught in a spider’s web. Just as his brain reached the point of seizing up entirely, he punched himself in the leg and forcibly derailed his train of thought.

Now is the time for calm. Tying myself in knots won’t solve anything.

Even so, a shadow fell over his face, and anxiety marred his usual composure.

“His Majesty himself will tell you more.”

Graeci’s words pulled him back to reality. A lavish set of double doors stood before them. Absorbed in his thoughts, he hadn’t realized that they had arrived

at the throne room.

The guards on either side swung the doors open. The first thing Hiro noticed upon stepping inside was the absence of any nobles. Even the imperial guard, who would usually protect the emperor, were nowhere to be seen. His brow furrowed in suspicion as he made his way along the red carpet toward the throne.

“Fourth Prince Hiro Schwartz,” a voice issued from the throne. “I am glad to see you safely returned.”

The emperor was sixty-seven in years, but he had the vigor of a man half that age. The presence he commanded was astounding. Still, his face was graver than when Hiro had seen him last, and his voice was tinged with anger.

“I must commend you on quelling the rebellion in Lebering.”

“With all due respect, Your Majesty,” Hiro said evenly, “that was Princess Claudia’s doing, not mine.” He fell to one knee and bowed his head.

The emperor narrowed his eyes, intrigued. “Under ordinary circumstances, I would ask you for a more complete account. Alas, there are more important matters at hand. Raise your head.”

Hiro lifted his black eyes to look up at the throne.

“I suppose it falls to me to explain what has occurred.”

With some irritation, the emperor launched into a concise account of the situation to the west. In brief, Aura had struck out from the rest of Third Prince Brutahl’s forces and fallen for an enemy ruse, ending up surrounded by the Faerzen Resistance. Seeing a chance to turn a disaster into a victory, Liz had set out, meaning to crush the enemy between her troops and Aura’s.

Unfortunately, Draali forces had chosen that moment to stage an incursion into Faerzen. They had blindsided the imperials mid-battle. Faced with an army in full momentum, Liz had elected to retreat. Perhaps out of a sense of responsibility, she had taken the rearguard, but she had failed to halt the enemy. Her forces were routed and summarily captured.

“Rescuing Celia Estrella is of paramount importance,” the emperor concluded. “As you are no doubt aware, Lævateinn has taken no other master since

Emperor Artheus. She is too valuable to lose.”

“With respect, Your Majesty, are you saying that we should leave Brigadier General von Bunadala to die?”

“Precisely. I have received most emphatic requests for her safe return from Third Prince Brutahl and others, but the empire has no shortage of talent equal to this Warmaiden. I see neither the urgency nor the value in paying the costs of her retrieval.”

“With respect, Your Majesty, I believe you are too quick to give up on her. She is young and her talent is still budding, but given time, she could equal Mars himself.”

“Then you would have me ascribe this blunder to the follies of youth?”

The emperor’s eyes flared with impatience. He produced a scroll of paper from his pocket and tossed it at Hiro’s feet, gesturing with a thrust of his chin for him to read.

Hiro opened the scroll up. The sum written inside would bankrupt a small country. It wouldn’t outright destabilize the western territories, but they would very much feel it. Most likely, the emperor intended to redirect the nobles’ ire toward Aura before it erupted into outright rebellion.

“Even Mars himself stumbled once or twice, Your Majesty,” Hiro said. “Had it not been for Emperor Artheus’s forgiving heart, he would never have become the Hero King of Twinned Black that the people love to this day.”

If Aura truly was at fault, it was only right that she should be punished, but this situation would never have arisen if the emperor had not pushed Faerzen to the brink in the first place. To push all responsibility onto her and leave her to die was myopic in the extreme.

“Fourth Prince Hiro Schwartz.” The emperor’s voice dripped with undisguised displeasure. “You would liken me to His Majesty the First Emperor?”

Artheus’s deeds still echoed through the ages. By contrast, Emperor Greiheit had accomplished nothing worthy of renown, and his deeds in battle paled next to his ancestor. His gaze turned murderous. Unsurprisingly, the comparison had wounded his pride.

He must be at his wits' end. Not that I can blame him, with every nation on the continent trying to plant a knife in the empire's back.

Inwardly, Hiro sighed, but outwardly he only shrugged. At that, a gust of wind blew through the chamber, although the windows were shut. A cool breeze grazed Hiro's cheek, and an invisible blade pricked at his throat. Even so, his gaze never wavered as he looked up at the throne.

A growing pressure set the air groaning as the pair stared wordlessly at one another. The emperor's knifelike eyes seemed to pierce to the bottom of Hiro's very soul. Hiro only gazed back with unflappable composure, the slightest of smiles on his lips. For a long time, their contest dragged on, until at last the emperor broke into a grin.

"Interesting. Out of respect for your boldness, I will reconsider Brigadier General von Bunadala's punishment. If only I had courtiers with eyes like yours, I would sit far more comfortably on this throne." He sat back and breathed a heavy sigh. "I assume that you have a good reason for being so insistent. Very well, I will hear it."

"May I ask a question first, Your Majesty?"

"I will answer if it is in my power."

"Has the grand duchy made any demands for Lady Celia Estrella's safe return?"

A princess of the Grantzian Empire was a valuable enough hostage on her own. One who was also the wielder of Lævateinn would be priceless. They wouldn't have taken her alive unless they intended to ransom her. They must have said *something*.

"Nothing as of yet."

"I see."

Hiro looked down, letting a disappointed slump of his shoulders conceal his anger. That wasn't possible. They must have made some demand that was inconvenient to the emperor. If they truly had said nothing—and that was a big "if"—it could only mean that they were ignorant of Liz's true worth, but that simply didn't make sense. Every nation on the continent had heard of the

crimson-haired wielder of Lævateinn, and she had been leading an imperial army. The grand duchy and the Faerzen Resistance couldn't possibly be unaware of her identity.

Whatever the case, the emperor was unlikely to say anything more on the subject, and pressing the point would only irritate him. Hiro wanted to avoid that, if possible—it could easily jeopardize his future plans. This was a moment for compromise. He let the matter drop, with the understanding that the man owed him a debt.

“Then this is what I believe we should do,” he said. All he could do was present his original plan. Considering Liz and Aura's position, that was the only way.

But it'll be a race against time. I have to settle this crisis as quickly as possible.

He took a deep breath to calm his nerves and looked back up at the throne. “I propose that we attack Draal.”

The emperor's brow furrowed. “Oh? Not Faerzen?”

“Fighting both the grand duchy and the Resistance at once would delay the reconstruction of Faerzen by a decade, perhaps even two,” Hiro explained, complete with gestures. “Your Majesty's dream of unifying Soleil would remain just that.”

“And what makes you so certain? I could easily relinquish Faerzen and make Draal or Steissen my foothold in the west.”

The man was quite incapable of relinquishing Faerzen—that was the cause of this mess—but Hiro bit back that particular observation. “I do not believe you could, Your Majesty. Or rather, I believe that would be categorically impossible.”

In an instant, the information he had gathered clicked into place, and he shaped it into an argument that not even the emperor could disagree with.

“Relinquishing Faerzen would not placate the Resistance. If anything, they would see it as an opportunity to take revenge on the western territories. If we were to march on Draal and Steissen at the same time, we would be at war with three nations on one front. The west would collapse, potentially shaking the

empire to its foundations. And that would put paid to any hope of unification.”

“If you understand that, why propose an attack on Draal? You will accomplish nothing but wasting time.” The emperor heaved a heavy sigh. “And these constant battles have left the western territories with no more men to spare.”

During the first Faerzen campaign, Aura’s tactical genius had snatched victory from the jaws of defeat, but not before Third Prince Brutahl’s blunders had incurred heavy losses. During the second—led by the emperor himself—Stovell had returned covered in glory, but he had sacrificed a lot of lives to sack the capital. Even now, a number of Liz’s soldiers had been supplied by the western nobles; her defeat would have taken many of them out of commission.

“But asking the central nobles to field the troops would take too long,” Hiro added, rising to his feet. “Brigadier General von Bunadala’s fort could easily fall while we gather men. And for all that time, we would be leaving the sixth princess at the mercy of her captors.”

“That alone should convince you to abandon this plan. I will not launch some fool attack on Draal if it might cost me Lævateinn. You will ride to Faerzen and join Third Prince Brutahl.”

“With respect, I believe that’s all the more reason to strike first and strike now.” Hiro ignored the emperor outright. A clack of his boots on the stone floor drew the man’s attention. “Draal and the Faerzen Resistance believe that the final battle is at hand, and both of their backs are against the wall. The grand duchy has only just signed an armistice with Steissen. They must have marched their men straight from one battlefield to another. And the Faerzen Resistance is headless, its support is waning, and its soldiers are physically and mentally exhausted.”

Hiro’s confident oration held the throne room in thrall. The passion in his voice had the power to silence disagreement. Even in the emperor’s presence, he delivered his argument with a regal bearing.

“Our forces are stronger. If you want to advance into the west, let me lead them.”

The emperor narrowed his eyes searchingly. “And from where will you procure your troops? The west has no more to give. The eastern territories will

take longer to supply men than the central. Turning to the south would be a fool's errand when they border Steissen—they will not give up their men gladly, and you have no time to negotiate.”

“I agree, Your Majesty. That is why I will attack Draal with my own forces.”

The emperor's jaw almost dropped. It was hard to blame him. Hiro's private forces numbered fewer than three thousand, five if one included new recruits. The grand duchy would not have marched *all* of their forces into Faerzen; they might have signed a peace accord with Steissen, but they would still be wary if they had any sense. Even a conservative estimate would put the nation's remaining forces at upward of fifty thousand men. The suggestion of attacking with five thousand would wipe the smile from a jester's face. That was a madman's proposition.

“You are surprised, Your Majesty. Draal will be too. Isn't that how wars are won? I will strike where they least expect me to, knock them reeling, and frighten their forces back to their homeland.” Hiro lifted a hand toward the throne. “And when they return, I will wipe them out in a single stroke and force them to sue for peace.”

Laugh if you want, his declaration seemed to say, *but I'll be the last one laughing*. His fingertips brushed his eyepatch, and his lips twisted into a fearless grin.

“You had best start choosing diplomats, Your Majesty.”

That was more than a suggestion. It was a challenge—a veritable blade of words that struck the emperor in the chest. For a long moment, the man was too stunned to speak, but soon enough his throat began to quiver with laughter.

“Ku ha ha ha ha!”

Hiro blinked in surprise. It was rare to see the emperor so much as crack a smile. Some time passed before the man spoke again, and even after his laughter finally subsided, an amused gleam lingered in his eyes. Hiro's audacity seemed to have impressed him.

“Very well. Let us see if you can match your words. You have free rein. I will

be watching.”

“Then before I go, I must ask permission to—”

“You have it. Did I not say you have free rein?”

“Are you certain, Your Majesty?”

The emperor nodded solemnly and raised a hand. “Given your display here today, I expect you to acquit yourself. You need not beg my permission for every little thing.”

“Of course, Your Majesty. In that case, I must depart immediately. Time is pressing.”

With a small bow, Hiro turned and exited the throne room. Soon, he would be very busy. Several letters needed sending, but he had no time to pore over ink and paper in his chambers. He would have to write them en route. Drix could handle their delivery. The man would likely be able to guess their contents by their destinations, but it wouldn’t be a problem if he reported that knowledge to his superior. It would all come out soon enough anyway.

And then I’ll meet up with Garda in the western territories and head into Draal.

As he left the palace, putting his thoughts in order, he found Huginn and the rest waiting in front of the carriage. She bounded up to him.

“Are you done, Your Lordship?”

“Yes.” Hiro offered her a smile. “It went well.” He climbed into the carriage, sat down, and turned to Muninn as the other man got in behind him. “How did your investigation go?”

Muninn grinned. “The Knights of the Golden Lion? Nowhere to be seen. The place was as silent as the grave. One of the servants told me they’d headed out somewhere two days ago. Couldn’t find out where, though. Sorry about that.” He rubbed the back of his neck as he dipped his head apologetically.

“No, that’s more than enough. You’ve done well.”

As Hiro had feared, the emperor was giving the Knights of the Golden Lion orders. That was worrisome. Fortunately, whatever the man was up to, it

wasn't likely to interfere with his plans. The emperor would want to keep the knights' losses to an absolute minimum; he was probably reluctant to move them out of their barracks at all. They were, after all, the shield of the capital.

"And how about you, Drix?"

To Muninn's right, Drix wiped sweat from his forehead.

"I, too, have little to report. After serving out his confinement, the first prince left the capital with a small escort, supposedly to return to his lands. There has been no word of him since. It appears that High General von Loeing went with him."

"I see."

Stovell had finished his house arrest and vanished at the same time that the Knights of the Golden Lion had gone missing. It was tempting to think that the former had met up with the latter. Hiro doubted that, however. The emperor's trust in Stovell was at an all-time low, and it was likely that the first prince resented his punishment. Whatever their ruler was trying to accomplish with the knights, it would be foolish to put someone so unpredictable in charge.

"Well, there's no point in dwelling on it. Faerzen comes first."

There was no such thing as too much caution, but there wasn't much to be done when the facts were so unclear.

"Oh! I almost forgot!" Huginn piped up. "An eastern noble came looking for you, Your Lordship. They said to give you this."

She held out an envelope with a faint hint of perfume. The sender was, unsurprisingly, Rosa. Hiro deftly broke the seal and opened the letter. Several long-winded paragraphs of romantic declarations unfolded before his eyes. Internally promising to read them later, he skimmed through to the meat of the matter. In brief, the division between the emperor and House Krone had deepened during his absence, to the point that a particularly sensitive matter had sparked a public clash.

So he gave Sieg to House Maruk. Interesting...

After the death of the late Viscount von Wirst, Sieg had fallen under the direct

control of the emperor. Now, the man had given it to House Maruk, the most powerful of the undeclared noble families. When House Krone had demanded that he reconsider, he had outright turned them away, and when they had attempted to lay the groundwork to resume negotiations, he had rebuffed them *again*.

His plans are gaining steam. He must be trying to raise up a new great house.

Hiro put the paper in his pocket and turned to Drix. “I have some letters to write. Can you arrange messengers?”

“At once, Your Highness.” Drix stood to leave the carriage, but halfway through the door, he turned around. “I understand that time is precious. Please go on ahead. I will catch up with you soon.”

“Sorry for saddling you with the boring work.”

“Not at all, Your Highness. I am quite in my element.”

With a smile, Drix departed. As Hiro watched him go, Huginn produced a pen and ink and cleared a space to write.

* * * * *

As the doors of the throne room closed behind Hiro, the emperor shut his eyes and slumped back into his throne. His limbs hung limp and his body lay motionless, as though he had passed out. Chancellor Graeci approached with a concerned frown, but as he drew near, the emperor smiled.

“He fascinates me, this Hiro Schwartz. Not even my all-seeing gale could penetrate his thoughts. There is a barrier around them. A wall of some kind. I cannot see through to what lies beneath.”

“With respect, Your Majesty, I must advise against probing the boy’s secrets. I believe it may be dangerous.” Graeci made no attempt to disguise his misgivings.

The emperor’s brow furrowed dubiously. “And what has brought on this abundance of caution?”

“If you will forgive my presumptuousness, I took the liberty of doing some private digging into his background. I pulled every string I could—which,

needless to say, is no small number.”

“Such a trifle demands no forgiveness. Well? What did you learn?”

“To my embarrassment, nothing whatsoever. The boy all but wears the second emperor’s face, yet it seems that nobody has ever heard of him.” Graeci shook his head. His voice dropped a note as he continued. “Peculiar, is it not? That I, with all of my resources, could not unearth the slightest clue as to his origins? I confess, your decision to welcome him into the royal family seems hastier by the day.”

“It was his status as Mars’s scion that I needed, and I made good use of it. I cared not for his origins or capabilities.”

“But Lord Hiro *has* proven capable, Your Majesty. Unexpectedly so. And if we do not exercise caution in handling this new War God, he may grow daring enough to bite the hand that feeds.”

“If he does, you may retaliate as you please. Relegate him to a border province. Send him off to some battlefield and exhaust his talents. If he thinks to turn on us, I will send him to the grave myself. Does that reassure you?”

“If that is your will, Your Majesty.” Graeci’s lips knotted like he had something stuck in his back teeth.

The emperor breathed an exasperated sigh. “If you have something to say, say it. You of all people should know that I am not a man of patience.”

The chancellor raised his head and looked the emperor in the eyes. “I believe it would be prudent to reattach the boy’s collar. Every comrade he cares for is another chain around his neck. I see now that it was a mistake to separate him from Lady Celia Estrella.”

“That I have already done with Lady von Bunadala. His calm when I proposed abandoning her was admirable, but there was no mistaking the anger beneath. In that moment, I felt true animosity.” The emperor took out a report and fluttered it in the air. “All manner of delights await in Faerzen. Perhaps even new chains to affix to his collar. Soon we will bring him to heel.” He snorted, as though to say the matter was settled.

Graeci still looked unconvinced. “If Lord Hiro learns that you have been

behind everything, he will undoubtedly turn on us. With First Prince Stovell plotting schemes of his own, that seems an undue risk.”

“As I said, I will shackle him. And Stovell presents no more of a threat. My gale sees all, or have you forgotten?” The emperor rose and handed Graeci a letter. “Have this sent to Selene. If Lord Hiro fails, somebody else must take his place.”

“You refer to Second Prince Selene, Your Majesty?”

“None other. The Knights of the Golden Lion were my first recourse, but I have since thought better of it. I will need them unscathed in the months to come.”

“I will see it done, Your Majesty. Will you—?”

Graeci flinched back as a sudden gust of wind washed over him. When he tentatively reopened his eyes, the emperor was gone, leaving only an empty throne behind.

“Humility never was your strong suit,” he sighed. “I doubt it has even crossed your mind that events might not transpire as you expect.”

The figure of Stovell flitted through his mind. Stovell, whom the emperor’s ambitions had used and abused until he was a broken husk. The man no longer cared for titles, glory, or power—only for cultivating the strength to take his father’s life. The emperor had intended for Hiro to keep him in check, but Graeci feared that the new fourth prince might become a threat in his own right.

“Your gale is not omnipotent. Every gaze has its blind spots.” He looked down at the letter in his hand. “It was only because of their equal strength that Emperor Artheus and Emperor Schwartz did not turn on one another. That and their firm bonds—such a rarity in that age of turmoil.”

He produced a strip of red paper—a spirit seal—from his pocket, laid it on the envelope, and crushed both in his fist. Flame sprouted from between his fingers as the paper burned to ash.

“You have grown old, Your Majesty. Had you been but a decade younger, two perhaps, all would have gone as you anticipated.”

The stench of burning flesh suffused the chamber. Graeci's smile deepened as he stared at his blackened palm.

Approaching footsteps sounded through the hall, their tread somehow ominous. Alarm flared in Graeci's eyes. He spun to face the noise.

A man approached along the red carpet, his steps light but a little hesitant.

"Ah, Drix. My eyes. Is something amiss?"

Drix sank into a retainer's bow. "I have come to request further instructions."

He looked up at the chancellor, his eyes colder than they had ever been in Hiro's presence.

Chapter 2: Caged Flame

The nation of Faerzen had once rivaled the Grantzian Empire in size and might. The bounties of the Sea of Infini to the north had given rise to a thriving fishing industry, and with Six Kingdoms to the west and the empire to the east, it had served as a crossroads of continental trade. For many years, business had boomed.

War with the empire put paid to that. The sharp decline in public order following its defeat had scared the merchants away, and constant fighting had razed its once-fertile fields. The royal capital, formerly a hub of intermingling languages and bustling markets, had become a pitiful shadow of its former self, and repeated clashes between the Faerzen Resistance and the empire were fast reducing what was left to rubble.

The Draali encampment lay forty-five sel southwest of the ruined capital. Dinner was cooking. White smoke blanketed the camp, rising from various cookfires. Diligence was nonexistent. The soldiers had shed their armor and were busy carousing, some with bottles in their hands.

"It's days like this make life worth livin'!" cried one such man.

"Aye to that. It's an evening for drink and no mistake," agreed another.

Both were grinning, a sign of the lingering giddiness of victory.

"Oy, stop that," interrupted a stern-faced comrade. "No liquor yet. We're meant to be on watch."

The soldiers glanced at one another.

"If now ain't the time, then when is?"

"Aye, we beat the bloody empire! We've earned ourselves an ale or two!"

They had good reason for their revelry: their victory over Sixth Princess Celia Estrella of the Grantzian Empire. Few men on the continent could claim to have defeated the wielder of a Spiritblade, let alone taken them captive.

“Where’s the lady of the hour?” one of the men asked.

“Lord Puppchen’s got her in his tent.”

“Does he now? Sounds like he’s having himself a grand old time while we’re out here stopping anyone stealing back his prize.”

“Can’t blame him! I caught a glimpse of her and she’s just as fair as they say.”

The stern-faced soldier pulled a face at the other two’s bawdy conversation. “He’s not had such an easy time of it, from what I’ve heard.”

“Oh? What do you mean by that?”

“I mean the girl’s burned six men to death.”

“She what? Sounds like witchcraft.”

“How’d she manage that, then?”

The stern-faced soldier cast a fearful glance across the camp at a tent larger than the rest. “Don’t ask me. I just hope we’re not pissin’ off the gods up in their heavens.”

The master of the tent was inside: Puppchen von Draal, firstborn son of the grand duke of Draal. He picked up a silver goblet from his desk and brought it to his lips. Even that small motion made it plain that he was of noble stock; born heir to his homeland, he carried himself with grace. Even so, his muscular build testified that he had chosen the sword over the pen, adding a brutish wildness to his refinement.

“It’s true what they say,” he mused. “Victory lends wine a special sweetness.”

He eyed the goblet’s crimson contents for a moment before directing a domineering gaze to a strange object in the corner of the tent. There, where ordinarily a chest of drawers or a bed might have been placed, stood a metal cage. Even stranger, the bars were plastered with spirit seals.

Puppchen heaved a regretful sigh. “I brought a wealth of spirit seals from my homeland. Taking you prisoner consumed every last one. Between that and our losses in battle, this war has consumed perhaps two cities’ worth of yearly tax. But when I consider it the cost of taking you prisoner...suddenly, it does not seem like such a great expense.” He peered through the bars and grinned.

“Well? Do you think I have profited?”

Within the cage, bound by iron chains, sat a crimson-haired girl: Sixth Princess Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz. She was known across the continent as the first wielder of Lævateinn since Artheus. Recently, whispers had abounded that her star was rapidly rising, fuelled by rumors that she had added the descendant of the War God to her retainers.

“I don’t care,” she said.

For all her defiance, her voice was weak, and the shadow of exhaustion lay across her face. It was not hard to see why: her uniform was torn open in multiple places, with bloodstained bandages visible through the holes, and countless bruises and lacerations dotted her bare limbs. Despite all that, she was conscious. She glared back at Puppchen with hate in her eyes.

“Keep on scowling like that and you’ll ruin your pretty face.”

He reached beneath the desk and pulled out a wooden box. It was full of stones of various sizes, from pebbles to large rocks. He picked up one the size of his fist and turned to Liz with a villainous smile.

“It seems that there are certain circumstances under which the Spiritblade Sovereigns protect their wielders. For instance, yours uses the flames of purgatory to sear anybody who tries to do you harm.”

Several soldiers entranced by her beauty had tried to creep into the tent to take her for themselves, only to die fiery deaths. Puppchen had no pity for them. They had earned their fates. Besides, if they had succeeded in their pursuits, he would have lopped off their heads himself.

“But consider...what if an individual were not *trying* to do you harm?”

Liz’s forehead creased in puzzlement, but before she could decipher the words, Puppchen’s arm blurred. A dull smack rang through the tent.

“Agh!”

Her head snapped backward, carrying the rest of her over with it. She rolled about on the floor, crying in agony.

Puppchen gazed down at her with pitiless eyes and picked up a new stone.

“Do you see? I’m just tossing stones, and who knows where they’ll end up? I might as well be tossing them into a pond. Will your sword protect you then?”



His arm swung down. A thud rang out, like a mallet pounding earth.

“Agh!”

Liz’s back arched in agony, but before she could even finish processing the pain, another stone came flying.

“Ngh!”

Puppchen didn’t even give her time to scream. The impacts of the rocks were like spears through her innards. Dull cracks echoed throughout the tent, unpleasantly reminiscent of breaking bones.

“They’re funny things, rocks. Comically crude as weapons go, but just as lethal as a blade.”

Stone after stone battered Liz’s slender body.

“Even a pebble can kill if it hits just so.”

Again and again, for as long as Puppchen had ammunition left to throw.

“Humans are such strange creatures, don’t you think? When the body judges that a certain level of pain is too much to bear, it loses consciousness. But someone strong, like you... They don’t switch off. They get to suffer forever.”

His hands continued moving as he reeled off his explanation. If anything, his throws only became more forceful and brutal, and his breathing grew steadily more ragged.

“Agh!”

Blood sprayed from Liz’s forehead and spattered across the ground. Her chains prevented her from even covering her face. Without outside intervention, there would be no escape from this storm of violence.

“Shame is not the only way to break someone, you see.”

Stone after stone struck home with pitiless accuracy as she writhed in agony.

“When you teach through pain, when you beat your superiority into your enemy’s very flesh, even a Spiritblade’s chosen will submit.”

Only once his fingers scraped the bottom of the box did Puppchen finally stop

throwing.

“I may not have a Spiritblade of my own, but if I can break you through fear, what’s the difference?”

He stood up from his chair and approached the cage. Liz lay face-up, covered in blood, her chest heaving. Her cheeks were beginning to swell up. Puppchen licked his lips at the sight.

“It seems you are in need of more punishment. Well, rest assured, I will not spare the rod. I’ll turn that pretty face of yours as ugly as a sow.”

If he had hoped that stating his intentions aloud would break her spirits, he would be disappointed. Her eyes weren’t quite focused as she glared back at him, but a firm will smoldered in their depths.

“Rebellious, aren’t we?” he scoffed. “You’d have done better to submit. Now I need to put you in your place.”

He slid the box closer, picked up another rock, and threw it. Liz gritted her teeth, knowing that she couldn’t dodge it, but the pain never arrived. Lævateinn’s protection burned it to ash in midair.

“My emotions have gotten the better of me, it seems. Very well. We will resume this tomorrow.”

With a dismissive snort, Puppchen sat back down and took a sip of wine. His finger traced the rim of the goblet as he stared at Liz.

“So the Flame Sovereign does indeed have a will of its own. But from whence does its power stem? The Spiritblades are capable of conjuring supernatural phenomena, but as far as I can tell, they cannot do so on their own. One would then assume that they draw their powers from their wielders. From your mental fortitude...or perhaps a more physical part of you.”

He began to chuckle. The corners of his eyes crinkled with glee as he watched for her reaction.

“So it follows that if I break your spirit, your protection will fade. Today, I was unsuccessful, but in time, I will be able to touch you with my bare hands.”

The sight of her bloodstained body was providing a fine accompaniment for

his wine. Drink and good cheer began to loosen his tongue.

“Oh, how I await that day. I will draw out your nails, break your fingers, cut off your ears, pull out your tongue, file down your nose, and send you back to the empire in a box.” His eyes widened as he seemed to remember something, and he got to his feet. “Ah, yes. And I will send your head to this scion of Mars. Do you suppose he’ll even be able to tell who— Hm?”

Although Liz had previously been unresponsive, at the mention of Mars’s scion, her lips had pulled into the tiniest of smiles.

Puppchen flew into a rage. He rushed up to the cage, heedless of the wine that spilled in the process. “And what’s so funny, hm?! Come on, shed some tears like a good little girl!”

Lævateinn’s protection be damned, he picked up another rock, intent on showing her the true meaning of fear. Before he could throw it, however, a clear voice cut through the tent.

“What is the meaning of this?”

Puppchen spun around, eyes wide with surprise. A woman stood in the tent entrance.

“I will ask only once more, Lord Puppchen,” she said, advancing to glare at him with sharply angled eyes. “What is the meaning of this?”

Puppchen only dropped the rock and shrugged. Being caught seemed to prompt no remorse from him. “Lady Scáthach. Oh, don’t scowl at me so. The sixth princess and I were simply having a friendly discussion.”

He stepped back and turned fully toward the intruder. Named Culann Scáthach du Faerzen, she was seventeen in years—perhaps eighteen—and quite beautiful. Her turquoise hair was smooth and lustrous as silk; she wore it gathered in a bun at the back, leaving the sides to hang loose. Her features were porcelain-pale and fine as spun glass, and they seemed just as likely to shatter at a touch. The weighty armor sheathing her delicate body seemed to gird her purity in violence, giving her the harsh allure of a goddess of war. As her name implied, the blood of Faerzen’s royal lineage flowed in her veins. While the empire’s official line was that the royal family had been eradicated,

she was its sole survivor, hidden by the late king from the invaders' grasp.

The imperials always did struggle to finish what they started.



“This does not look like a discussion to me.” She looked Liz over and turned an accusatory gaze on Puppchen.

“My emotions got the better of me, I admit it. I did not mean to be quite so rough.” The man flashed what might have been a diplomatic smile, but there wasn’t an ounce of sincerity in his apology.

A wind blew through the tent. Puppchen grunted in pain as heat flared in his cheek. He lifted a hand to his face to find it wet and sticky. His fingers came away covered in blood.

“What are you doing?!” he cried.

Scáthach glared at him with undisguised fury. “She is a hostage, and you will treat her accordingly.”

She’d be a fine woman if not for her precious chivalry, he thought. His lips pulled into a grin.

She seemed to read his mind. Her azure spear rose to point at him, and her ice-cold eyes pierced him with a reproachful stare. “See that this does not happen again. Or perhaps *my* emotions shall get the better of *me*, and I shall relieve you of your head.”

“V-Very well. I will be more mindful.”

Even Puppchen could tell that he had pushed the woman too far. He fell to his knees and pressed his head into the dirt. As much as he might resent it, there was no question as to which of them really had the upper hand in their alliance. Scáthach’s queer powers made her a formidable warrior, but even aside from that, the Draali had been the ones to propose cooperation. Puppchen’s incursion had vital political importance; among other things, he needed a military victory to cement his status as the successor to his sickly father and as the heir to Draal. If his accord with Scáthach broke down, his hopes would be dust in the wind. He would return home empty-handed to face the scorn of his nobles.

I’d rather bow my head a thousand times to this stuck-up wench than that.

Puppchen gritted his teeth as he pressed his head to the ground. This was the

time to bite his tongue.

“I’m glad we have an understanding,” Scáthach said.

She lowered her spear and turned to Liz. She could not afford to offend Puppchen either. For one thing, she had failed in her bid to capture the Warmaiden, but more importantly, Third Prince Brutahl’s Second Legion still had strength in ample supply. As the leader of the Faerzen Resistance, it would hurt her cause immeasurably if Draal withdrew the troops currently keeping the imperials at bay. Puppchen’s interests aligned with hers, but by the same token, they needed one another. That made it difficult to demand custody of Liz, no matter how cruel the princess’s treatment at Puppchen’s hands.

“We must see to her wounds,” she said. “Would you fetch a doctor?”

“If a male one will suffice. I have no female doctors among my troops.”

Despite their clearly incompatible personalities, they had no choice but to take one another’s opinions into account. Aside from anything else, they could not fight the empire together without a common understanding to build upon.

“My troops are stationed outside the camp. I have female doctors you can call.”

“As you wish. I will bring them forthwith.”

Puppchen turned his back on her and left the tent. Once she was certain he was gone, Scáthach approached Liz’s cage, where the princess was gingerly hugging her knees.

“I am sorry,” she said, bowing her head.

The apology appeared to be sincere, but Liz’s eyes widened regardless. She was caught so off guard that she seemed to forget her pain.

Scáthach could hardly blame her. She continued with a rueful smile, “I do not seek to hurt you. Nor to shame you. But you must understand, I cannot let you go.” Admitting the precariousness of her position clearly pained her, but her smile had a Madonna’s compassion. “I will make it clear to Lord Puppchen that this will not recur.”

“But...if you don’t want to hurt me, then...what *do* you want?”

Liz's chains clinked discordantly as she moved. She grimaced—the very act of speaking seemed to cause her pain—but her crimson eyes did not waver as they held Scáthach in their gaze.

“Nothing so grand. I have no lofty aspirations of conquest. I seek something far more humble.” Her eyes flared with unrestrained emotion. Her azure spear hummed in her grip. “After all, I am not so rotten as the villains you call family.”

Murderous rage radiated from her body as her voice quavered with quiet fury.

* * * * *

The twelfth day of the eleventh month of Imperial Year 1023

Launen, in the northwest of the western territories

The sky was clear and blue. There was not a cloud in sight, only strange black shadows in the distance—too far away to make out clearly but almost certainly monsters of some kind. The land was one great swathe of green, dotted with wildflowers swaying merrily in the breeze. The majestic Travant Mountains rising on the horizon completed the scene, a natural bulwark against the multipartite western nation known as Six Kingdoms.

An armed force advanced crisply across the plain. It was entirely jet black: the horses, the men, the weapons, the armor. In the carriage at the center of the column, Garda and Hiro discussed recent reports and their future plans.

“Berg Fortress is the picture of tranquility, the margrave's nerves notwithstanding.” With a knowing grin, Garda handed Hiro a letter. “Here. From one Duke Karl Lichtein.”

Hiro read through the contents and a small smile spread across his face. “Excellent. It sounds like he'll do as I asked.”

“You wrote to him before you left the capital, I presume?”

“That's right. I told him to amass his forces on the Steissen border and look threatening.”

“If he sparks a war, we will be in no position to help.”

“Call it a gamble, but I think it's a safe bet. Steissen won't want to stage an

invasion with their succession squabbles, and if they do try, they'll be up against the Rising Hawk. Rankeel will be able to hold them off long enough for us to arrive."

"You've thought this through." As Garda nodded in approval, a thought struck him. "You know, I never did ask. How fared your visit to Lebering?"

"Its new queen is quite formidable. She's someone to watch, in more ways than one. With all of the Relics, I doubt anyone will be able to oppose her."

"Relics, hm? I heard the word more than once while I commanded the Liberation Army."

"Have you heard of the zlostá ancestors? The ones who terrorized Soleil a thousand years ago? The Relics are weapons made from their manastones."

"Quite the prizes, then. I've yet to find a blade to match Bebensleif. Perhaps this new queen will agree to cede me one of hers."

Hiro shrugged—*I doubt it*—and changed the topic. "Anyway, now that we're both up to speed, what do you know about events to the west?"

"As much as made its way to Berg Fortress—which is to say, not much. The margrave scrounged for every scrap he could, but Gurinda is on the far side of the empire. All we could glean is that they've been captured."

"Then you know about as much as I do. If we could narrow down Liz's location, we could start making plans to rescue her, but all I know is that Aura is under siege at a place called Fort Mitte."

Garda's face turned grave. "It sounds as though neither has time to spare."

Hiro nodded. "That's another reason I need to speak with High General Vakish."

"Ah, the watcher of the west. I hear he did exactly that as the men of Draal marched into Faerzen."

Hiro shook his head. "Let's not make assumptions just yet. I want to hear his side of the story."

He looked out of the window. On the other side of the glass rose a forbidding fortress: Tutelary Citadel, the keystone of the western border and the empire's

eye on Draal. Its concentric walls were lined with turrets ready to foil an attack from any side. At the front entrance loomed a sturdy iron gate. The portal opened into a central courtyard from which a unit of cavalry could sally forth to catch an enemy unawares as they gazed up in despair at the walls.

The guards in the gate watchtower reacted to the Crow Legion's name with open surprise, and their confusion only multiplied when Hiro stepped out of the carriage. They stared down, goggle-eyed. Eventually, the gate lifted, and a man emerged with an escort of soldiers. He was of ordinary height and build and seemed generally unremarkable in every respect.

"My deepest apologies, Your Highness!" he cried, hurrying toward Hiro and sinking into a vassal's bow. "I am Vakish von Hass, whom His Majesty Emperor Greiheit has graciously entrusted with command of Tutelary Citadel. It is an honor to welcome Lord Hiro Schwartz to my humble domain."

Hiro blinked in surprise, not at the introduction but at the air of command that emitted from the man's every pore. His appearance might have been unremarkable, but he radiated an aura that was anything but.

"That will do for formalities," he answered. "But I'd appreciate it if you could fill me in on events across the border."

"Of course, Your Highness. I followed your requests to the letter." Vakish produced a document from his pocket. On it was Hiro's signature. "But this is no place for such discussions. Please, if you would come inside?"

He ushered Hiro and his company through the gate. The rest of the Crow Legion followed. The townsfolk's eyes grew wide as they watched the black-clad soldiers pass.

"They look like they'd stick you as soon as look at you!" one of them whispered.

"Look at that armor!" said another. "Dark as the abyss! They must be the Knights of the Royal Black!"

"No they en't, idiot," someone more knowledgeable replied. "They're the ones what the Knights of the Royal Black took their colors from." He pointed to the standard fluttering over the host. "See that? That's Mars's sacred standard.

En't no one flies that but the Crow Legion."

The Crow Legion had been an elite fighting force led by Mars's Black Hand one thousand years ago. Their strength had toppled the zlostas, saved humanity from an age of chaos, and brought peace to the world. Yet after the second emperor passed away, his successor feared their strength, branded them traitors, and had them exterminated—a disgrace that had lasted until the fifth emperor pardoned them decades later. Their reputation had recovered in the decades since, and they were now revered as the legendary warband of the War God.

"Then you're sayin'...him at the front...?"

"Got to be Mars's scion, don't it? The One-Eyed Dragon in the flesh."

One townspeople's reverent words propagated rapidly through the crowd. Like a game of telephone, retelling led to exaggeration, and exaggeration gave rise to expectation. Soon the crowd was cheering loud enough to rattle the soldiers' breastplates. The Crow Legion, however, did not seem especially bothered by the attention. They marched onward with Hiro's carriage at their head, faces unhurried and gait unbroken.

The procession cleared the residential quarter and came to a halt at a steep rise beyond. Castle Gehirn stood on the mound, where its position allowed for an unobstructed view of the citadel. Only Hiro and Garda were permitted entry. Huginn and Muninn were instructed to wait in the courtyard with the rest of the Crow Legion.

The war room of the famously unassailable Tutelary Citadel was on the castle's second floor. Presumably to ensure secrecy, it was the only chamber on that floor. Its sole entrance required passing through a guarded chamber, which was fully manned twenty-four hours a day.

Hiro took his seat at the head of the table. At his right stood Garda, hand on his pommel, with a glare that warned Vakish and his vice-commander not to make any suspicious movements.

"Your bodyguard takes his duties seriously, I see," Vakish said with a strained chuckle. He turned to his vice-commander and retrieved a bundle of reports. "Well then, Your Highness, as per your orders... First, the fate of Brigadier

General von Bunadala. It appears that after learning of Lady Celia Estrella's defeat, she retreated to Fort Mitte in the southwest of Faerzen. We have received no word that it has fallen, so it seems likely that she is still unharmed, although there can be no doubt that time is against her."

Food and other supplies would be a mounting concern, and Aura only had so many men. If aid did not arrive soon, Fort Mitte would become the site of a corpse-strewn bloodbath. Hiro cupped his chin in his hand and sank into thought, nodding to grant Vakish permission to continue.

"It appears that Third Prince Brutahl intends to rescue her," the general said, "but as of yet, his efforts have borne no fruit. The Draali forces are keeping him at bay."

Left to his own devices, the third prince couldn't hatch a plan to save his life. Before adding Aura to his retinue, his idea of strategy had been possessing larger numbers. He would not be capable of turning the tables. The Second Legion was a headless snake, devoid of both a mouth to swallow its prey and fangs with which to poison them.

"I have heard that the grand duchy has attempted to negotiate with the third prince. They have offered Lady Celia Estrella and Brigadier General von Bunadala's safe return in exchange for certain terms."

Judging from Vakish's expression, those terms had been impossible to stomach. It was not difficult to imagine how that had gone.

"They demanded the empire's withdrawal from Faerzen...along with twenty spirit swords, one hundred spirit stones, and two thousand golden grantzes. And, as if that weren't enough, a sizable portion of the western territories."

Hiro sighed. "Negotiations broke down, then."

"Indeed. And we have been at an impasse ever since."

Nobody would choose Liz and Aura when weighed against the entire empire. Still, while the situation was far from ideal, it was a blessing just to know that Aura was alive. As for Liz, however...

No sooner did the thought enter Hiro's mind than he noticed that Vakish was wearing a conflicted expression.

“Is there something else?” he asked.

“Indeed. Regarding Lady Celia Estrella...Third Prince Brutahl asked to dispatch an envoy to ascertain her condition, but the Draali side refused point-blank.”

That could mean they feared an attempt to steal her back, or that she was already dead. The worst-case scenario was that they had traded her away. Many nations would happily pay a high price for the wielder of a Spiritblade. If Six Kingdoms had her, that could be truly problematic. Still, there was no need to jump to wild conclusions just yet. He knew too little to make any definitive judgments.

“Good work. Keep your ear to the ground. If anything changes, I want to know.”

“Of course, Your Highness.” Vakish bowed.

Hiro advanced to the next topic. “Tell me what’s happening in Draal. Why choose now to stage an attack on Faerzen? If we know their goals, we can work to foil them.”

“Their present incursion numbers thirty thousand, Your Highness. They are led by Puppchen von Draal, the first son of the grand duke. His father is bedridden with illness, and he is already the leader of the nation in all but name—or at least, he was, until the armistice with Steissen. Now, his support is crumbling.”

“What happened?”

“Are you aware of the succession conflict in Steissen, Your Highness?”

“I don’t know the details, but I’ve heard that two noble families are warring... Ah.” Immediately, Hiro realized what must have occurred. “So the Draali nobles think the time was ripe to invade. They are dissatisfied that this Puppchen agreed to an armistice instead.”

“Your wits are as sharp as they say, Your Highness. Indeed, he never even gave them a say in the matter. He negotiated the armistice himself.” Vakish paused, the report still in his hand. “The man’s popularity is falling, and his arrogant disposition is doing nothing to salvage it. A competing faction has sprung up around his younger brother, a man of more agreeable conduct...who

happens to be far more pliable, of course.”

So it was not only Steissen that was on the verge of splitting in two, and yet Puppchen was ignoring his domestic troubles to march into Faerzen. The reason was all too obvious, and Hiro almost felt angry as the piece snapped into place. He knew then and there that he had made the right decision in attacking Draal. A stratagem took form inside his head. He only regretted that there was no map on the table.

“What will you do now, Your Highness?” Vakish asked.

“I will lead the Crow Legion into Draal.”

“By my count, your forces number no more than five thousand. Am I to assume that you will meet up with others en route?”

“No. They are all I have.”

“With respect, that is...ambitious. Some might even say reckless. I can spare several thousand of my own men, if you would consider it.”

“No, thank you. The Crow Legion will be enough.” Hiro turned to Vakish’s vice-commander. “Is there a map in the castle?”

“A map, Your Highness?”

“Yes. One of Draal. Any scale will do.”

“Of course, Your Highness. If you will give me a moment.” The man walked to a corner of the room. There stood a waist-high pot bristling with rolled-up maps. He picked out one of the parchment scrolls and returned. “Allow me to clear a space on the table.”

Vakish looked on with polite bemusement as his vice-commander unfurled the map with a practiced hand. Hiro stood, picked up several nearby pawns, and walked around the table to stand over it.

“This is what I will do.” He placed a pawn on the south of Draal. “The grand duchy may have reached a peace accord with Steissen, but the fires of war must still smolder on their border. Both nations will be keeping large portions of their forces in reserve in case hostilities break out again.”

“As you say, Your Highness.”

“As a result, Draal cannot afford to leave its southern territories undermanned. Which means that Puppchen must have gathered his forces from the north.” He placed another pawn on the north of the nation. “If his popularity is waning, he may even have resorted to conscription. Either way, we can be certain that the military presence in the northern regions is light. Even five thousand men will be able to inflict a surprising amount of damage.”

As Vakish gazed down at the map, Hiro handed him a letter.

“Still, I need your help to maximize our chances of success. I won’t ask for anything demanding. It’ll be easy, even. You just have to do what’s written here.”

Vakish’s brow creased with uncertainty, but he unfolded the letter. His eyes grew wide as he took in its contents.

“Your Highness, is this some manner of jest?”

“Not at all. I’m quite serious.”

“If I read this correctly...it seems that you intend to put Draali settlements to the torch.”

“That’s right.”

The man blanched. Beside him, his vice-commander shot Hiro a disbelieving glance. Only Garda, who had known in advance about the letter’s contents, remained unperturbed.

“Keep reading,” Hiro prompted. “To the end.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Vakish quailed under Hiro’s gaze. His lips pursed as his eyes sped down the page. At last, he set the letter down on the table and breathed a heavy sigh.

“You must understand, Your Highness, I cannot accept these orders lightly, even from a man of your station. If I were to fail, I would likely find myself shorter by a head.”

“Nobody will be coming after your head, General. His Majesty has given me his blessing. More to the point, failure will not stain your record. These instructions are mine, and I take responsibility for them. I hope that eases your

fears.”

Multiple schemes would be necessary to seize victory, but that was the only way to rescue Liz and Aura. No longer was Hiro a naive child incapable of saving anyone. He had grown since the age of chaos one thousand years ago. His reach was still woefully small, but he now had the strength to save the handful of lives it could enclose.

At last, Vakish’s answer broke the silence. “Very well. You have my cooperation.”

Hiro’s smile widened with satisfaction. His fingers reached up to touch his eyepatch. “I’m glad to hear it. Oh, and one more thing.”

He beckoned Vakish closer. With trepidation on his face, the general obeyed. Hiro leaned over and whispered a few words into his ear, then clapped a hand on his shoulder.

“Can I trust you with what needs to be done?”

“You can, Your Highness. I must warn you, however, what you have asked for cannot be done within the day. Would tomorrow suffice?”

“That will be fine. Thank you.”

If possible, he would have liked to defeat Draal wholly on his own, but to put all the pieces in place entirely by himself was too tall an order. Fortunately, indebting himself to Vakish here would not be too much of a hindrance. He would simply offer the man a share of the glory when all was done.

“Well, time is pressing, and we have our own preparations to see to. If you’ll excuse me.”

Hiro left the war room with Garda at his side. He had secured High General Vakish’s cooperation. All that remained was to invade Draal, lead the enemy into a trap, and force them to the negotiating table.

* * * * *

The thirteenth day of the eleventh month of Imperial Year 1023

The sun had not yet risen when the Crow Legion finished its preparations and departed from Tutelary Fortress. Crossing the border into the Grand Duchy of

Draal took less than an hour. Under cover of night, Hiro directed his troops to surround the nearby villages. They took every inhabitant captive without discrimination—women, children, and the elderly.

“Hand them over to High General Vakish’s men on the border,” Hiro commanded.

The soldiers wasted no time in executing his orders. Soon enough, the villagers were being herded into long columns and marched back to High General Vakish. Cowed into compliance by the Crow Legion, few dared to fight back. In general, however, while the soldiers were certainly fierce enough to be intimidating, most of the villagers were simply confused. With the exception of several scuffles that broke out when someone resisted, their captors treated them with unexpected kindness. They seemed more bemused than anything else as they shuffled away toward the border.

In short order, village after village was summarily rounded up and captured. By the time the first rays of the morning sun split the blue, Hiro and his men had arrived at the town of Lessende, near the border stronghold of Hantigal Fortress.

“Will this be the last one, Your Lordship?” Huginn asked.

Hiro lifted his head from his map. The atmosphere outside his roofless carriage was heavy. Black-clad soldiers had the town surrounded, with all of its inhabitants gathered together out in the street. Every face was gray with fear. Some of the townsfolk wept while others begged for their lives.

He looked back at Huginn, whose honeyed skin was shining in the sun. “Let’s say so. We’ve taken longer with this than I planned.”

He beckoned one of his guards and commanded them to send up a smoke signal. That would direct the other forces to begin carrying out their orders in their respective villages.

“Begging your pardon, Your Lordship,” she said, “but Draal’s got seven border settlements. We’ve only nabbed four, this one included.”

For all that Huginn seemed dissatisfied with their progress, taking four settlements in such a short span of time was acceptable. It was good enough

not to interfere with their future plans.

“Don’t worry. We’re well on track. And I’ve got several schemes in mind to make sure things stay that way.”

Strategy was best not thought about too deeply. It was a simple game, in the end: whichever side did a better job of deceiving the other would win. Artheus had taken issue with that assessment, objecting that it was precisely the deception that called for deep thought, but Hiro had blithely asserted that anybody could do it.

“So long as you’re certain.” Huginn didn’t sound very reassured.

Hoping to soothe the unease in his subordinate’s heart, Hiro donned a small smile and pressed a finger to his lips. “I am certain. Don’t you believe me?”

“C-Course I do, Your Lordship!” She raised both hands to hide a rapidly reddening face and waved him away. “I’d best get to scouting!”

Huginn turned her horse about—perhaps a little quicker than necessary—and rode away, trailing dust. As a nonplussed Hiro watched her go, a shadow fell over him.

“All is ready,” said a gruff voice.

He turned to see Garda, who was once again acting as his vice-commander. The tall zlosta was wearing his usual stern expression, but something about him seemed oddly disheartened. For a moment, Hiro wondered what, but he soon guessed the problem: like Huginn, Garda was concerned that they were behind schedule, and since he had been responsible for training the Crow Legion, he considered the delay a personal failure.

With a rueful sigh, Hiro got to his feet. “Good. Now let some of the captives go. Just a few will do.”

“At once.”

Garda turned and signaled to his troops, who released several youths from their bonds. The townsfolk looked around, clearly confused. It was hard to blame them. They had only just been captured; what were their captors doing setting them free?

“You have been released for one reason alone: to report what happened here to your rulers.”

Hiro raised his left hand to the standard bearer. A great flag unfurled on the wind. The townsfolk gasped as they saw the sigil it bore: a black dragon clutching a silver sword, the livery of the second emperor.

“And if you would look behind you...”

The youths and the soldiers turned around as one. All across the plain, plumes of black smoke rose into the sky, issuing from where the nearby villages should have been. The dark stain rapidly spread across the firmament like a great black dragon devouring its prey.

Screams rose from the crowd. Cries and curses filled the air as they wailed that their town would be next.

Hiro looked down on their misery with dispassionate eyes. “Spread the word across all of Draal: the Grantzian Empire is invading.”

He raised his arms wide, and a gust of wind sent the Black Camellia streaming behind him, its hem beating at the air with elegant violence. He raised a hand to brush his eyepatch. The townsfolk trembled.

“And recall what was once said of the War God’s army: that the foulest fiend falls when the Crow Legion rides.”

Those words had first been uttered long ago in praise of the Crow Legion’s valor—the same valor that had made them so fatefully dangerous to the third emperor.

“Remember those words. Now, go!”

With a thrust of his chin, Hiro directed the youths to run. Once they were gone, he collapsed back into his carriage.

“A fine performance,” Garda remarked. “You’d make a better player than a prince.”

Hiro smiled, raising a hand to the sky. “That’s the first step of our plan complete. Time for the next. We’ll start marching as soon as we hand the townsfolk over to High General Vakish.”

“Understood. I’ll recall the units at the other settlements.”

“Please. Oh, and have you brought my swiftdrake?”

Swiftdrakes were a draconid species nonindigenous to Soleil. Found primarily in the Shaitan Islands, they had been introduced to the mainland ecosystem when an enterprising adventurer had accidentally released several into the wild while returning from an excursion to the east. The specimen in question had been captured after causing trouble around Berg Fortress four months prior. It seemed happy to serve as Hiro’s mount, which had proven useful, as he had never been able to ride a horse.

“As you requested. The beast is in the back, I believe.”

Garda called Muninn over.

“Got need of me, boss?” the man asked.

“I left you in charge of Lord Hiro’s swiftdrake, did I not? Where is it?”

Muninn scratched the back of his head awkwardly, pointedly avoiding eye contact. “Right, that. Y’see...well...”

Garda clapped a hand on his shoulder. “You have not let the beast escape, I trust.”

“Nothing like that, boss! It’s just... Agh, Huginn took it out scouting!” With a panicked apology, Muninn fell to his knees and pressed his forehead to the dirt.

Garda’s eyebrows rose. “She can ride the beast?”

Nobody could blame him for his surprise. Swiftdrakes had all the pride of the dragons they called kin. They rarely condescended to allow humanoids onto their backs.

“Not ride it, boss. But it’s taken a shine to her. Likes joining her on missions and such.”

Garda pressed an exhausted hand to his forehead. “Taking that creature on reconnaissance... What is that fool thinking?”

Hiro only chuckled. “There’s never a dull moment with these two around. At least they take my mind off things.”

Garda shot him a sharp glare. “Is this really a laughing matter? She’s overstepped the mark this time. I’ll ensure she knows it once she returns.”

Hiro sat upright and shook his head, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “Don’t worry about it. We’ll fight better if we don’t get worked up over every little thing.”

“We’ll fight better with discipline in the—”

A soldier interrupted their conversation. “The townsfolk have been handed over, Your Highness,” he said. “The men are ready to act on their orders.”

“Good. Send word to all units: we’re moving out.”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

The man bowed and got back onto his horse. He brought his mount around and rode away, hoisting a great standard high as he left.

“Ought to be getting to my men.” Muninn, too, rode away to join his unit.

A dust cloud rose above the Crow Legion as it hastily organized itself into ranks. Officers barked orders all around. Hiro watched for a while, pleased by their performance, before turning his gaze to Hantigal Fortress. Only one sel away across the grasslands, the fortification was a hive of activity, even to the naked eye. They must have realized that the towns were burning—the smoke was impossible to miss—but they weren’t leaving the safety of the walls. Apparently, they had been struck by a bout of cowardice.

“All units, move out! Keep those ranks in order!” Garda’s gruff voice shook the morning air, injecting the ranks with a suitable degree of tension.

As his carriage shuddered into motion, Hiro raised his right hand. “It’s time, Garda. Let’s give those men cowering in Hantigal Fortress a dose of reality.”

“Aye, let’s.” With a nod, Garda raised his sword to the standard-bearer. “Strike the torches! Teach them to fear the name of the Crow Legion!”

Soon, black smoke was rising over Lessende. It spread across the sky like an inkblot, the stain growing larger by the second. The Crow Legion marched out in perfect lockstep with a despair-inducing spectacle at their back.

Hiro and his troops proceeded southward, keeping a respectful distance from

Hantigal Fortress, then pivoted to march directly past the fortification. They didn't bother engaging the forces inside—with the situation in constant flux, they didn't have a second to waste. They passed directly beneath the walls without incident, but as they were pulling away, at eighty-nine rue from the fortress, there was a sudden flurry of movement from inside.

"Here they come," Hiro murmured.

A messenger rode up. "The gates have opened, Your Highness! The enemy means to sortie!"

"Either they were waiting for us to pass or they were too proud to ignore an enemy right in front of their noses."

He looked back at the fortress, where a cloud of dust was rising. If the Crow Legion was attacked from behind, it would take heavy casualties. It seemed that his only play was to turn around and face the enemy head-on.

"How many are they?"

"We can't tell, Your Highness, but our spies report that Hantigal Fortress's garrison is fewer than four thousand! We surely outnumber them!"

A frontal charge would inevitably result in losses. The time had come for Hiro to employ his first scheme.

There's no point holding back. Better to swing first and swing hard.

He touched his hand to his eyepatch, then thrust it out toward the messenger. "Tell the standard-bearer to turn their banner to the right. We'll turn at full speed and crush them."

The man nodded and rode off. Hiro turned to Garda.

"Do you trust Muninn to play his part?"

"The weather's clear today. A man could see for sel. He'll spot the signal true enough."

Garda glanced toward the horizon. Hiro followed his gaze. A lone figure stood far out on the plain, holding a black dragon standard tilted to the right.

"I'll lead the first cohort. The front will be mine today," Garda said.

“Not this time. I’ll lead the charge.”

“Oh?” The zlosta looked back in surprise, his feet halted halfway to his horse’s flanks.

Hiro pointed to their right and grinned. “I want her to learn a thing or two.”

As Garda turned to look, a carefree voice rang out from the same direction. “I’m back, Your Lordship! And I know their numbers!”

Huginn rode in on horseback with Hiro’s swiftdrake loping along beside her. Hiro jumped down from his carriage and broke into a run. He leaped onto the swiftdrake’s back and took the reins.

“I’m heading to the front. Huginn, you come with me. Tell me your findings on the way.”

“What of me?!” Garda shouted after him.

Hiro looked back over his shoulder. “You take command of the main force. I’ll be back once I’ve sent our enemies packing.”

Before the zlosta could answer, Hiro patted the swiftdrake’s head and it sprang away. Huginn rode beside him, straining her limits to keep pace.

“They’ve got a little upward of three thousand, Your Lordship. Two thousand infantry; what’s left is cavalry.”

“Understood. We’ll charge as soon as the first cohort is ready. We should have the momentum to punch right through them.”

The foremost ranks of the first cohort were facing the right way by the time Hiro arrived at the front, but the central and rear ranks were still settling into position—not a terrible turning speed, but there was definitely room for improvement.

“They need more training...but we can’t wait for the rest of the cohort to form up.”

The Draali forces were approaching at full speed, still intent on striking their enemy from the rear. The Crow Legion needed to charge at them head-on, take them by surprise, and negate their momentum or else it would be overrun. Besides, it was vital to keep their attention facing forward.

About a thousand men were ready to charge. Hiro's decision was swift. He raised his voice for all to hear. "Attention, first cohort! The vanguard will charge alone!"

Horseshoes thundered. Armor clanked. The clamor of the battlefield filled the air. Even so, his voice carried. Its distinctive timbre drew his men's attention and rang clearly in their ears.

"Center and rearguard, charge when ready!"

One soldier beat his spear against his shield in answer. Another followed, then another, and another. Soon the noise grew into a great roar that shook the battlefield.

"If you hunger for victory, raise your swords! If you spit on defeat, raise your shields!" Hiro drew Excalibur from his hip and raised it high. "Scatter them before us! Victory to the Divines!"

He surged forward as his cry echoed across the plain. One thousand black-clad riders followed in his wake. Visible confusion spread through the enemy lines; they had expected to catch their foe unawares.

"So far, so good. We'll make a dent, at least."

The rest would come down to a clash of wills and a contest of strength. With Hiro taking direct command, the Crow Legion's morale was as high as it could be, but could the Draali troops say the same? While the burning of the villages would have enraged some of them, it would have struck others with terror, and that discrepancy would breed disruption. A few soldiers gripping their bridles in fear was all it would take to throw their ranks into confusion.

"Their right flank's open!"

Hiro saw the gap in the enemy's defenses and plunged into it with tremendous force.

"Stand firm, men!" a Draali soldier cried, seeing him approach. "Stand fir— Agh!"

"Too slow!"

Hiro's stroke lopped the soldier's head from his shoulders, the man's face still

twisted with terror. The masterless horse bolted, crashing into its neighbor and sending the rider on top reeling. Hiro kicked the man from his saddle before he could recover, and the soldier vanished beneath the hooves of the cavalry behind him.

“Drive them back! These dogs burned our countrymen! Give them no quarter!”

Another Draali soldier stood in Hiro’s path without fear, though it was clear who was the better swordsman. Such valor was worthy of the greatest respect—and Hiro granted it.

“I’ll meet your best with mine!”

He took the man’s life with a strike of peerless skill, snatched his spear, and hurled it. The projectile passed all too easily through several soldiers’ heads, watering the ground with a rain of blood.

“Break through the center!” he cried. “Aim for the commander.”

“Follow His Highness!” came a bellow behind him. More and more soldiers picked up the battle cry until it echoed on all sides.

Faced with that bestial howl, the enemy’s momentum broke utterly. At the same instant, the Crow Legion’s center and rear ranks caught up with the charge, forming a hammer to slam the wedge in deeper.

“Fall back!” a Draali voice cried out. “Regroup with the heavies and reform ranks or we’ll be routed!”

Hiro turned toward the voice to see a middle-aged knight with a sword held high. His gaudy armor marked him immediately as a commander. Hiro pulled on his swiftdrake’s reins to turn it around, intent on running the man down, but before the beast could charge, the knight toppled lifelessly from his horse.

“Sir Beyanne?!” came a horrified cry from the Draali ranks.

By Hiro’s side, Huginn lowered her bow. She flashed a proud grin. “Got to let us lowly peons get our licks in once in a while, Your Lordship!”

Hiro shrugged as nonchalantly as he could muster, but he couldn’t hold back a smile. “I suppose I do. And I see you’re still an impressive shot.” He clapped the

woman on the shoulder. “You do the honors. The day is yours.”

“Yes, Your Lordship!” Her chest swelled with pride as she held her bow up high. “The enemy commander is dead! Shot down by Huginn, foremost disciple of His Lordship the Fourth Prince!”

“Sir Beyanne, dead to a stripling brat?! Bah! To arms, men! Avenge his honor or you disgrace the name of Draal!”

A group of soldiers bore down upon Huginn, burning with vengeful anger. She faced them head-on, unafraid. Her grin only grew wider as she raised her bow.

“Aye, I did him in, and so what? The battlefield’s for the strong and he wasn’t strong enough!”

“Impudent girl! You think a lucky shot makes you victorious?!”

“What does gender matter on the battlefield?! You just sound like a sore loser!”

“You dare—” The man’s furious grimace froze forever as Huginn’s arrow nailed him through the forehead. He toppled from the saddle.

“We are the Crow Legion!” she declared. “The children of Mars!” And she unleashed a devastating hail of arrows.

“Blast it! Retreat! Retreat!” The enemy vice-commander’s eyes widened at Huginn’s bow-work. He yanked hard on his reins. “Fall back and regroup!”

He set about barking orders with a look of desperation. Unfortunately, he had left the decision until far too late. At that moment, Muninn’s detachment crashed into the Draali forces from the rear.

“An attack from behind?! Impossible! What happened to the heavies?!” Panic spread across the vice-commander’s face. “Curse it all! Retreat! Run for all you’re wor—”

His cry ended in a gurgle as a Crow Legion spear burst through his chest. If Hiro’s eyes did not deceive him, it had been Muninn who had dealt the killing blow. The burly man cut through the press with magnificent spearwork. He caught sight of Hiro and raised his weapon high in a salute.

“And so the trap snaps shut,” Hiro murmured.

Before even approaching the fortress, he had ordered Muninn and his detachment to peel off from the main force, using the smoke from Lessende to conceal their presence. The ploy had only been intended as insurance in case the enemy emerged, but it had paid off splendidly. The enemy heavies, late to the battle, would have made easy prey for Muninn's cavalry.

"That's one win under our belts."

Huginn pouted. "There goes my oaf of a brother again, hogging all the glory."

"Don't worry. I said the day was yours, remember?"

The sister had slain the enemy commander, while the brother had spearheaded a perfect pincer maneuver. Together, the siblings made a formidable team.

"You mean it, Your Lordship?"

"Of course. So don't look so down." Hiro offered her a crooked smile and an encouraging nod before turning his attention back to the battlefield. "Let's not chase them too enthusiastically. I don't want any unnecessary casualties."

Around the pair, the battle was still in full swing. Draali soldiers turned to flee even as they watched. Nearby, a unit was preparing to pursue the runaways.

"Do not follow!" Hiro called out. "If they run, let them run! Only strike them down if they resist!"

The more enemy soldiers fled the battle, the faster news of the Crow Legion's invasion would spread. Additionally, the sight of the bedraggled troops retreating would scare the nearby townsfolk into evacuating. The more pressure the Crow Legion could put on the grand duchy, the easier it would be to force them to the negotiating table...and yet, their goal still felt so distant, and Liz almost out of sight.

Damn it, I can't dwell on these things. The men will sense it.

Seeing the commander moping around after what was supposed to have been a victory would damage morale. Some things weren't in his immediate power to change. He had to put them out of his mind and focus on the battle in front of him.

“Are you all right, Your Lordship?” Huginn asked. “You’re looking awfully dour.”

She sounded concerned. He must have let more of his feelings show than he’d intended.

“I’m fine. Don’t worry.”

“For true?”

“I was just thinking. That’s all.”

Hiro silently berated himself for his impatience. For someone so fond of lecturing others on the virtues of prudence, he was doing an awful job of practicing what he preached. His lips pulled into a self-deprecating smile.

Garda chose that moment to appear, his expression sour. If his armor was spattered with blood, his face was positively caked with the stuff, looking for all the world like a demon’s horrific visage. Sticky crimson dripped from the tip of a greatsword soaked with gore.

“The battle yet continues,” he grunted. “This is no time to rest...although perhaps I cannot blame you for not deigning to engage weaklings such as these.”

The stench of death was rank on the man, but if his poor mood was any indication, the fighting had not nearly satisfied him.

“We have other battles ahead of us,” Hiro said. “There’s no point in wasting our energy. We’ll need all we can get when the time comes.”

“When I am exhausted, I will rest in the rear. But the One-Eyed Dragon ought to conserve his own strength until I can no longer fight in his place.”

Garda gestured over his shoulder, where Hiro’s roofless carriage rested. Hiro took the man up on the unspoken offer and climbed in from his swiftdrake’s back.

“Thank you,” he said to the creature. “We won’t be fighting for a while, so have a good, long rest.”

He gave it an appreciative pat on the head. It trilled happily.

“Garda, you’re in charge. I have some planning to do.”

“As you command.” Orders received, Garda turned his horse about and plunged into one of the remaining skirmishes.

Hiro looked to Huginn and asked for the results of her reconnaissance.

“Of course, Your Lordship. As my men tell it, the local nobles are trying to raise an army from the nearby settlements, but they’re having a tough time. Most men of fighting age went with the grand duke’s son into Faerzen, so they’ve been left with the dregs.”

“How many do they have?”

“Six thousand. Sounds like a lot, I know, but most of them are peasants. I’d wager half don’t know how to ride. Their formations will be heavy on the infantry.”

Peasants or nor, six thousand was six thousand. Gathering that many men was an impressive feat. The Crow Legion wasn’t likely to suffer many fatalities in this engagement, but Hiro anticipated several hundred wounded, putting their effective numbers at a little over four thousand. Considering that he still didn’t know the size of the Faerzen invasion force, he would need to keep losses to a minimum in the next battle too.

Different commanders might adopt different approaches, but terrain stays constant.

He drew a map from his pocket and spread it out on the floor of the carriage. Predicting the route that the Draali nobles were likely to take, he could see that battle would be joined on a plain similar to this one, although there was nowhere with a good view for a unit like Muninn’s to conceal themselves. If the Crow Legion advanced apace and nothing unexpected happened in the meantime, the two forces would clash on the following day.

If we just charge right at them, it’ll turn into a contest of strength. With our fewer numbers, that’ll put us at a disadvantage.

The enemy would be more than willing to throw men away if it would slow Hiro’s forces down. Their goal was to buy time, either until the grand duke’s eldest son returned from Faerzen or his second son could send reinforcements.

Whichever they were holding out for, Hiro had to defeat them quickly and decisively or it might come back to haunt him.

He raised his head from the map and looked around.

Looks like it's over.

On all sides, his allies raised victory cries. Countless swords and spears reached for the sky. The ringing of steel faded away, leaving the enemy beaten and running desperately for their lives.

"Huginn, can you fetch Garda?"

"At once, Your Lordship!" Huginn bounded away.

Sure enough, Garda soon returned. "Have you some need of me?"

"It looks like we're in for a battle with the local nobles," Hiro said.

"I hear as much from Huginn. Six thousand, half peasants, was it?"

"I want to keep our losses to a minimum."

"Then we shall need a plan...but resources will be scarce here in enemy territory, and we hardly have the time for trickery. What do you propose?"

"We'll encircle them. We'll need to be well-coordinated, so I'll brief the battalion and brigade commanders tonight. I'll let Vakish decide what to do with Hantigal Fortress. Can you send a messenger his way?"

"As you wish."

As Garda beckoned a messenger to relay the details, Hiro turned to Huginn, who had been left with nothing to do.

"I need to get some rest. Can you take charge while I'm asleep?"

"Of course, Your Lordship! I'll see no one disturbs you until you're ready, no matter what!"

Hiro sighed. "Just wake me if there's an emergency."

With that, he closed his eyes and set about recovering his strength.

Chapter 3: Fire and Ice

The fourteenth day of the eleventh month of Imperial Year 1023

In southwest Faerzen was a region known as Old Duret, which was most remarkable for its patchwork landscape of grassy plains and dry wilderness. The curious geography was not a natural phenomenon. Many royal generations prior, the king of Faerzen had attempted to transform the region into a verdant paradise wherein he could cultivate spirit stones to resist the empire. His plans had been foiled by the cold, harsh winds of the Travant Mountains, which wilted his newly planted vegetation in the ground, leaving a lifeless wasteland that no spirit would draw near. People fled the land in droves and monsters settled in their place. Soon enough, Old Duret had become a haven for all manner of beasts that would descend from their dens in the mountains to prey by night on nearby settlements.

So it was for a time, until the monsters began to roam far enough east that the nation could not ignore the severity of the issue. Its begrudging solution was Fort Mitte. In a curious twist of fate, the fortress had outlasted Faerzen, the kingdom that had erected it. Now, it was a bastion of the Grantzian Empire.

As the sun rose higher in the sky, a fierce battle was underway. The Faerzen Resistance had the fort surrounded and were attacking on all sides. Raising their shields against the bombardment of arrows raining from the walls, they hoisted ladders and began to climb.

Fortunately for its occupants, Fort Mitte had been constructed to weather monster attacks. Its walls were high and its gates were sturdy. A half-hearted offensive would be easily repelled; nothing less than an all-out assault could crack its shell. That said, one might doubt that the fort's continued resistance could be so easily explained, and they would be right to do so. It remained standing only thanks to the genius of the commander currently occupying it.

Above the battlements of the main gate rose a small tower. In peacetime, it would have functioned as a watchtower. Now, it served as the imperial army's

impromptu command center.

“We can’t treat all our wounded! If anyone’s got spare hands, send them our way!”

“Everyone’s got their hands full! If you’re out of bandages, find some cloth to tear!”

Soldiers dashed to and fro across the chamber. Their urgency made it clear that every second counted.

A handsome young man burst into the chaos. “Lady Aura!” he cried. “The western wall has signaled for reinforcements!”

His words were addressed to a girl seated at the desk.

“Sir Spitz. You’re panicking.”

The girl’s leaden eyes speared through him. Although her emotionless expression could easily be taken for coldness, the clipped ends of her eyebrow-length fringe had an undeniably dainty quality, and with her large eyes and small frame, she inspired the same protective instincts as a kitten or a mouse. In the words of a certain knight, she was an angel. That she had retained her proportions at the age of seventeen was nothing short of miraculous.

Her name was Treya Verdan Aura von Bunadala, and her uncommon tactical acumen had earned her the position of brigadier general. In the military, she was known as Aphrodite, the Warmaiden—a modern-day War God. Out of all of House Bunadala of the five great houses, it would not be unfair to call her the most promising talent.

“Send a reserve unit to the western wall. And one to the eastern one. It’s about to fall too.”

“At once!”

Von Spitz dashed back out of the room. As he left, Aura returned her gaze to the map on the desk. The diagram detailed every nook and cranny of Fort Mitte. Several pawns stood atop it, indicating the positions of various units. From the tower’s commanding position above the front gate, she could survey the entire fortress, letting her easily see where reinforcements were most

needed.

“We can still hold out,” she murmured.

If she was honest with herself, this battle was unlike any other she had fought. She could not see its course. The path contorted itself in labyrinthine curves, and darkness obscured the way ahead. Even so...

“I will stay strong.”

Her aides and soldiers were depending on her. She did not have the luxury of breaking down and giving up. Aside from anything else, she bore the title of the Warmaiden; her conduct would reflect on the War God, and she would not disgrace his name.

For a while, Aura sat in silence. At last, with a trembling hand, she reached out to the book lying on her desk: the Black Chronicle, a record of the life and times of the second emperor. It had never left her person since the moment she had received it as a birthday gift from her father at a young age. Whenever she was lost, or overwhelmed, or felt the urge to cry, she sought solace in its pages. Indeed, she probably knew the second emperor better than anybody else in Aletia, a fact in which she quietly took pride. She closed her eyes and breathed deep, feeling some of her nervousness dissipate as Emperor Schwartz’s strength bolstered her own.

“My mind is clear and my thoughts are free.”



Schwartz had repeated that same mantra to himself whenever his resolve wavered. The Black Chronicle claimed that the words had not been his, but from whom they originated, it did not say. Some claimed that they had belonged to one of Schwartz's educators; others theorized that the first emperor had spoken the words to soothe his blood-brother's nerves. The truth, in essence, was uncertain.

Aura herself found the question intriguing, but this was no time to ponder it. She terminated that train of thought and reopened her eyes. Her hand was no longer trembling. She had calmed considerably. Pleased, she clenched and unclenched her hand a few times, then patted herself on the chest.

"I can do this." She nodded, as though reinforcing the sentiment to her own ears, and swept her gaze around the castle walls. Her hands began moving pawns across the map. "Sir Spitz."

"Yes, my lady!"

"The south wall needs reinforcing. Send two units."

"I shall tell them immediately!"

Forgotten in the chaos and confusion of the room around him, a man trembled underneath the desk. He was Buze von Krone, the administrator of Faerzen. As his rank suggested, he was the effective ruler of the nation now that it was under imperial control. Originally a vassal of the Faerzen royal family, he had defected to the empire and brought the monarchy down from within in exchange for a seat at House Krone's table. His actions had earned him the position of administrator, but his reign had been short-lived. As the Faerzen Resistance's activities grew fiercer, he had abandoned his duties and fled the royal capital to seek sanctuary with Aura.

At last, the man crawled out from beneath the desk and stood up, looking around cautiously as he emerged. "Lady von Bunadala, I must know what has become of our reinforcements. Will this ramshackle fort hold out until they arrive?"

Aura's forehead creased with irritation at his questions. "Stop talking."

"I beg your pardon?"

Such rude treatment from a girl less than half his age stunned Buze into silence. Aura ignored him. She moved a pawn from the center of the map to the east, then summoned von Spitz again.

“Send one unit to the eastern wall.”

Aura was pouring every last drop of her tactical ability into the defense, and wherever she found her own knowledge lacking, she pored over books and historical records to compensate. Such activities left no time for rest. She had not slept in two days, perhaps three. Naturally, her concerned subordinates had tried to persuade her otherwise, but their protests had fallen on deaf ears. With all of her senses devoted to observing the battle, she barely even registered their concerns.

“That should hold them off for now.”

“But for how long?! Each wave is fiercer than the last— Eek!” Buze cowered at the whistle of an enemy arrow.

“Shut up. You’ll be safer in the courtyard. Complain there instead.”

“Well. I may very well take you up on that.” The man staggered toward the door.

At that moment, a sudden chill lanced up Aura’s spine.

“Hm?”

She peered through one of the tower’s peepholes at the scene beyond the walls. The enemy had called off their attack and were pulling back from the fort. Oddly, all of them seemed to be looking upward. She followed their gazes.

“That’s not good.”

A strange wisp of black smoke swirled in the midmorning sky. It rapidly expanded as Aura watched. In moments, it had swallowed the sun. What was happening? Her chest twinged with unease, but the weather wasn’t an enemy she could defeat. For a few seconds, she stared up at the darkening sky, until a mighty clap of thunder shocked her back to her senses.

“We should use this time to prepare.”

This wasn’t the moment to be marveling at unusual phenomena. The enemy

had finally withdrawn, affording her a precious opportunity to plan. It would be stupid to waste it.

She turned to return to her desk, and found that she couldn't.

“Wha—?!”

The desk exploded into splinters. Where it had stood, an azure spear now protruded from the floor amid a swirling dust cloud. In a dazed stupor, Aura approached the weapon, cocked her head, and reached out to touch it.

“Lady Aura! Get down!”

Even as her aide's frantic cry reached her ears, it was swallowed up by a thunderous rumble. No—to even call what followed a “sound” would be too gentle. It was a shock wave that snatched her up and battered her mercilessly.

One instant, Aura was weightless; the next, a high-pitched ringing was echoing through her head. Only then did she realize that she was lying on the ground. Through bleary eyes, she dimly registered the corpses of soldiers, impaled where they stood by spears of ice. More bodies lay on the floor, unmoving. She might have thought them stunned like her, if not for the blood gushing from gaping holes in their stomachs. Everything seemed very far away.

All of a sudden, a familiar face lurched into view. “Lady Aura! Stay with me!”

It was von Spitz. He was wounded too. Blood flowed from his shoulder. It looked like he was shouting something, but she couldn't make it out. She couldn't even remember where she was or what she was doing. Everything was a blurry haze.

Just as she was about to let go of consciousness, an object on the floor slid into focus: the copy of the Black Chronicle that had been her constant companion for almost as long as she could remember.

Idiot. Stupid. What are you doing?

She stretched toward it for all she was worth, as though reaching for a missing part of herself.

I have to stay strong.

At last, her fingers touched the corner of the book, and the haze seemed to

lift from her mind. Screams, roars, gurgles, all manner of cries rushed into her ears, suddenly brought into sharp relief.

“Lady Aura!” von Spitz exclaimed. “Please, you must hold on!”

“I’m all right. Don’t worry.”

Aura cradled the book to her chest and rose to her feet. She staggered and almost fell, but planted her feet and braced a hand against the wall until she was stable.

“You mustn’t move, my lady. You took a blow to the head.”

Von Spitz seemed intent on making her rest, but Aura shook her head. “No time. Assess the damage. And keep an eye on the enemy.”

If the Faerzen Resistance attacked now, the fort’s fall would be guaranteed. With one hand pressed to her still-throbbing skull, she briskly set about issuing orders to von Spitz and the rest of her aides.

“Send the reserves with the fewest casualties to man the battlements. Move the injured under the walls for treatment. If there aren’t enough doctors, have the walking wounded help. And fetch me a new desk and a map.”

For a long moment, von Spitz and the rest of the aides stood stock-still, stunned by the barrage of commands. Aura clapped her hands and glared—*Get to it!*—and they scattered like spiders.

She looked around the room and her gaze settled on a certain figure.

“And someone move that mewling idiot somewhere I don’t have to hear him.”

Buze von Krone rolled around the floor in agony, clutching the stump of his newly severed arm.

* * * * *

A gentle blue sky stretched from horizon to horizon, inviting one to topple into it if they would only reach out their hands. The air was so peaceful and clear, it was hard to believe that humans could be vying for supremacy on the ground below. Hiro took no comfort in the sight, however. He gazed upward, frowning.

“Something up there caught your ire?” Garda remarked.

Hiro lowered his black eyes to face his lieutenant. “Not exactly. I felt something. Something strong.”

Moments earlier, a familiar presence had abruptly flared to the northwest. He cast one last glance after it and narrowed his eyes, but the chill he had felt up his spine did not return.

“I won’t fault you for worrying,” Garda grunted. “But for all our sakes, you’d do better to focus on the enemy before us.”

Hiro cracked a self-effacing grin. “You’re right. We have a battle to win.”

A host of soldiers in intimidating armor stretched out in front of him, trampling the peaceful atmosphere beneath thousands of armored boots. These were Hiro’s own forces. In the distance, far beyond their orderly ranks, a black shadow writhed.

The Draali nobles had gathered every man they could from the surrounding settlements in a bid to slow the Crow Legion’s advance. Imperial spies put their number at seven thousand, slightly above Huginn’s estimate. They had the conscripts at the center, shielded by a vanguard of career soldiers who would lead the charge. Cavalry units waited on both flanks. The layout, called the dragon-scale formation, excelled at punching through the enemy’s center.

“Not the most surprising choice,” Hiro observed. “Probably the only one they could have picked.”

“Teaching complex tactics to green conscripts in a matter of days would be a madman’s task,” Garda agreed. “But the dragon-scale is easily understood.”

The Crow Legion had taken a slightly different tack. Its light infantry had dismounted and taken up a somewhat recessed position in the center. To the flanks waited two wings of cavalry, the core of the army’s strength, looming over the enemy like a pair of unfurling wings. This was the dragon-wing formation, designed to anticipate an enemy charge. The above collectively made up the first cohort. The second cohort, a long column of cavalry, lay concealed behind them. The two together formed what was known as the iron lure formation.

“Time to show off the fruits of your training,” Hiro said.

Garda snorted. “I’ve learned well your penchant for madcap schemes. I made certain they could perform the iron lure if you called for it, or any number of other maneuvers besides.”

“I look forward to the results.” Hiro took a deep breath and thrust his right arm out to the side, signaling the riders. “Well, then. Showtime.”

The livery of the black dragon fluttered on the wind. A horn blasted, and the soldiers began to beat their spears against their shields. The cacophonous symphony shook the air and heated the blood. The troops’ battle cries resounded through the body to invigorating effect.

“Morale seems good. I suppose I’ll go and give our enemies something to think about.”

“I’ll command this rabble until you return. Good luck—not that you’ll need it.”

Hiro’s only reply was a wave over his shoulder. He cast a meaningful glance at Huginn as he left.

“Task force, move out!” she cried, understanding him perfectly. “Order in the ranks or you’ll be on latrine duty for a week!”

Hiro urged his swift Drake forward. The task force followed, five hundred men in total, raising a cloud of dust behind them. The enemy spotted them easily on the flat plain but ventured no response beyond watching warily, seemingly unsure of what to make of their movements.

“We’ll circle around and attack them from behind,” Hiro said to Huginn.

“Got it, Your Lordship! Only...are you certain they’ll let us? We’re awfully easy to spot.”

“We don’t have to follow through if it’s looking dangerous. We’ve already done our job.”

“Eh? What d’you mean?”

Before answering, Hiro signaled to the standard-bearer. The task force’s banner waved. The main force, led by Garda, saw the signal and ground into motion, raising their own dust cloud.

“Our job is to show them our forces splitting up. That’s all.”

That, by itself, would breed confusion in the Draali command. Should they split up too, or should they commit all their men to crushing the Crow Legion’s main force? They would be well aware that the slightest hesitation could be lethal on this battlefield. A second’s hesitation could put either side on the back foot.

“And when a mediocre commander loses the initiative,” Hiro continued, “the first thing they’ll think of to compensate for their error is to charge straight at the heart of the enemy.”

Even as the words left his mouth, the Draali forces began to advance toward the main body of the Crow Legion.

“Let’s stop here for a bit. We’ll keep an eye on their movements, consider how to respond, and pick our time to strike.”

“D’you mind if I ask you something, Your Lordship?” Huginn asked hesitantly.

“Was I unclear about anything?”

“No, no, nothing like that. It’s only, well...”

Hiro cocked his head as the woman hemmed and hawed. “You can ask me anything. I don’t mind.”

“No, it’s just, I... Argh, I’m sorry!” Apparently convinced that she had offended him, she thrust her head down into a panicked bow.

“I’m not annoyed or anything. Just tell me what’s wrong.”

He offered her a gentle smile to calm her nerves, but she couldn’t quite meet his gaze. Eventually, fiddling with her reins, she turned to him with upturned eyes.

“Right. Well, you don’t have to answer if you don’t want to, but...”

Hiro nodded, more curious than anything else, and waited for her to continue.

“I’m just wondering...how come we’re here in Draal at all? I figured we’d be marching into Faerzen and rescuing Liz, all heroic-like. I mean, if any commander could pull that off, it’s you.”

So that was what had been bothering her. It was a natural question to have, and there was no reason to be cagey about the answer.

Hiro held up a hand with his index finger raised. “The first reason is politics. If we joined forces with Third Prince Brutahl, the western nobles would run away with all the credit.” He lifted a second finger. “The second is to compensate for Liz’s and Aura’s mistakes. Tepid results won’t satisfy the emperor. I need a victory so decisive that nobody could find fault with it.” And finally a third finger. “Lastly, invading Draal will come in useful down the road. It’s not a certain thing, but it could pay off in the long run.”

“Huh. That makes sense...I think.” Huginn scrunched up her face and fell silent, clearly making an effort to think his words over. That alone made the explanation worthwhile.

Hiro turned his attention back to the battlefield just as the armies collided. Ringing steel and battle cries drifted to their position on the wind. An enormous plume of dust rose over the fighting, flecked with red gore.

“There they go. Hopefully they’ll all be focused forward.”

“Aye.” Huginn nodded. “Looks like they’ve fallen for it hook, line, and sinker. But surely some will realize what we’re planning? Won’t they flee?”

“Some might, but thousands of charging soldiers are like a flood. They’ll have no choice but to be carried along.”

This was where the iron lure formation would truly shine. Its soft center invited the enemy deep into its heart, focusing their attention to the fore. The Draali front lines would already be experiencing the illusion that they were winning—that they could push on through to victory.

“They’ll pour into the breach, not even suspecting that they’re being guided.”

Unfortunately, it was not victory that they would find, but the Crow Legion’s second cohort. The long column of cavalry would slam through the hole that the Draali forces had worked so hard to tear, crumpling their front line utterly. The enemy would try to fall back, only to find the first cohort’s wings hemming them in on either side. More than anything else, their own momentum would work against them; the trained infantry of the vanguard would be crushed

between the Crow Legion's cavalry in front and their own conscripts in the rear.

"So what now?" Hiro asked. "Do you plan to sit and watch as the rest of our forces win the battle?"

Huginn's eyes widened. She had been so engrossed in watching his plans unfold that she had completely forgotten herself. Her face flushed red.

"Of course not, Your Lordship! My apologies!"

The Crow Legion's victory was already guaranteed without the task force joining the fray, but the Draali army's death throes would be vicious. They were fighting for their homeland, for their families. They would dig in their heels to their last breaths.

"Give the signal," Hiro commanded. "Let's break their spirits."

Why waste a chance to reduce the Crow Legion's losses? The task force was, after all, perfectly positioned to strike at the enemy's rear.

"Task force, charge!" Huginn cried. "We'll fall on them from behind!"

She spurred her horse into a gallop. Hiro nudged his swiftdrake after her and was soon keeping pace. The rest of the task force readied their lances and followed them, burning with battle fervor.

"Look, Huginn. One of their commanders knows what they're doing."

Realizing that they were being surrounded, perhaps four hundred cavalry had broken away from the Draali army's right flank. It was an astute response. Against another commander, it might have worked.

Hiro cast a sideways glance at Huginn. Embarrassment seemed to have galvanized her anger.

"I'll teach you to stand in my way!" she shouted at the oncoming cavalry, her voice suddenly filled with authority. "Hear me, soldiers of Draal! See our black standard and tremble! The War God's favor is with us!"

She let her reins drop and stood up in her saddle. Without wobbling an inch, she plucked several arrows from her quiver and launched them in quick succession. Each carved a perfect arc to find its place behind a soldier's eyebrows. The rest of the task force answered her show of skill with valor of

their own. Their lances glinted in the sun as they slipped deftly through Draali armor, sending men tumbling from horseback. Those of the enemy who were lucky enough to survive the onslaught were trampled beneath the horseshoes of the soldiers behind.

“Gyaah!”

The task force’s fury would not be halted. Blood sprayed in all directions. The stench of death befouled the air. Emerging from the cloud of gore, they collided with the rear of the Draali army. The trap fell shut and the massacre began.

The Crow Legion painted hell across the battlefield with a crimson brush. Unable to muster the will to resist, the enemy fled in disarray, making easy prey for imperial spears. Blades dyed the earth red as they supped on blood.

Only the enemy’s surrender could bring an end to the bloodshed, which required taking their commander captive. Hiro and his unit rode hard for the heart of the enemy army. By the time they arrived, however, a white flag was already flying.

Garda stood beneath the banner, grinning smugly. “Huginn. You’re late. Enjoying the scenery?”

Behind him, Muninn’s nostrils flared with pride. “I’ve got all the Draali nobles you could want right here, chief! Tied ’em up nice and neat!”

The Draali army’s leaders knelt in a line in front of the pair, bound with ropes.

“Losing to the boss is one thing...but to my oaf of a brother?”

Huginn looked positively stupefied to see her chance at glory snatched away. After she had fought so fiercely in the name of reclaiming her dignity, Garda had beaten her to the punch. If she had been quicker off the mark, their positions might have been reversed. Still, there was no point in bringing up might-have-beens. Hiro patted her back in consolation.

“There’s still plenty of fighting left to go,” he said. “You’ll have other chances.”

“I’ll outshine them all next time.” She pouted. “Even the boss.”

“That’s the spirit. Soon, you’ll be teaching him.”

Garda nodded in agreement. “You pick things up like a sponge, girl. You’ll surpass me in no time.”

“I-I don’t know about that!” Huginn shook her head forcefully at the unexpected praise.

“I’ll train you well once we’re back down south. You’d best be prepared.”

“I look forward to it!” The woman beamed so brightly that Garda practically had to squint against the glare.

The zlosta turned and shot Hiro a disparaging glance. “And I’ll not suffer the One-Eyed Dragon to steal my every glory. I offer no apologies for seizing this day.”

“By all means. The more you all compete with one another, the less work left for me.”

Letting Garda’s challenge wash over him, Hiro surveyed the battlefield. The enemy’s main force had put up a white flag. More and more soldiers were laying down their arms and surrendering.

As he looked around, he caught a glimpse of something odd: a standard buried in the mud. It belonged to the Draali army, but it was not the flag of the grand duchy. That was unusual. Typically, imperial armies would fly either the royal family’s crest or the livery of their own house, the Draali equivalent of which was the flag of its ruler, the grand duke, but the standard in the mud was one that Hiro did not recognize.

Why weren’t they carrying their ruler’s colors?

In search of answers, Hiro dismounted his swiftdrake and approached the captured nobles. He kept his introduction brief. “A pleasure to meet you. I am Hiro Schwartz von Grantz.”

The men’s eyes widened at his name.

He continued. “You are nobles of the Grand Duchy of Draal, is that correct?”

Making sure to watch their faces for any flicker of a reaction, he swept his gaze over their armor, but none of them bore the sigil he had seen on the flag.

“You...” one of the nobles stammered. “You are the scion of the War God.”

“Surprised? Don’t worry. People often are.”

“I hope this victory tastes sweet while it lasts. We may die here, but Lord Handhaven will avenge us.”

“Ah. The grand duke’s second son.”

“So you know of him. Even now, he rides to bring you justice at the head of twenty thousand men.”

The noble seemed to have misinterpreted Hiro’s response, but Hiro saw no need to correct him.

“Excellent,” he said, never letting his smile drop. “Then I can question him myself.”

He had considered interrogating the nobles about the first son’s activities, but if the second son was coming in person, there was no need.

“That means I don’t have a reason to interrogate you anymore. Lucky you.” He called Garda over. “We’ll take them captive. Try to get anything you can out of them regarding the grand duke’s second son, but don’t be too rough. They’re to be treated well.”

“Treated well, hm? That’s a tall order, but if I must. Will that be all?”

Garda’s implicit question was clear—did Hiro not intend to ask the nobles about Liz and the events in Faerzen?

“They’ll know what’s happening within their own borders, but much less about events farther afield. We’d only be causing ourselves needless worry. I’d rather get the full picture directly from this Handhaven.”

He directed Muninn to make camp, then turned to stare at the dark sky to the northwest. His eyes narrowed.

* * * * *

Raindrops spattered down from the looming clouds. It was evening, and the cold wind from the Travant Mountains was bringing on a rapid chill. The soldiers assigned to tend the bonfires glared resentfully at the sky, covering their coals

with treated leather to protect them from the damp. The dinner shift was in a flurry as well, scrambling to salvage what they could as their cookfires went out.

Within the large tent in the center of the Faerzen Resistance's camp, located three sel from Fort Mitte, Culann Scáthach du Faerzen awoke with a start. Her face was gray and sickly. As she swept her vacant gaze over the tent, she caught sight of the man by the entrance. His name was Rache du Vertra. In the days that the palace of Faerzen still stood tall, he had been the captain of the royal guard.

"Your Highness," he said, expelling a sigh of relief. "I had begun to fear that you would never wake."

"I passed out, then." Scáthach pressed a hand to her aching forehead, like she was recalling an unpleasant memory, and emerged from the covers.

"You must not push yourself so, Your Highness," Rache insisted, hurrying forward to stop her. "Eat. Rest. Recover your strength."

"I wish to breathe fresh air. And to see the fruits of my labor."

She made her way to the entrance with uncertain steps. Rache offered her his arm, but she refused it. Her pride would not permit her to accept assistance.

At last, she emerged into the outside world and looked around, filling her lungs with crisp evening air.

"So I failed. Fort Mitte still stands."

The fortress's formidable silhouette rose in the distance, veiled in rain.

"We pressed the attack in the aftermath of your assault," Rache explained, "but the enemy were unexpectedly coordinated. They offered no openings. I can only apologize, Your Highness. We squandered the opportunity that you bought us, and at such a cost to your own health."

"Don't belittle yourself. Praise the enemy commander. This Warmaiden is a tactician without peer. If anything, her reputation understates her capabilities." Scáthach's voice was bitter. Her azure spear appeared in her hand, seemingly out of thin air.

Rache's face betrayed no flicker of surprise. He had witnessed the sight many

times before. “You must not use that power again,” he insisted. Anger infused his voice as he stepped closer to his princess. “Every time, it renders you unconscious. It is surely killing you.”

“I know. But when I saw that despicable face...my rage could not be contained.”

Rache’s brows knitted apprehensively. “Who do you mean, Your Highness?”

“Buze von Krone.”

She said nothing more, but it was enough. Rache ground his teeth. Palpable bloodlust emanated from his body. His fists squeezed so tightly that blood ran down them, dropping from his knuckles to soak into the mud. His eyes flared, his breathing grew ragged, and it was clear that he was only containing himself by force of will.

“Do you see? The mere mention of his name sends you into a rage. How could you expect me to hold back after seeing the man in person?” Scáthach’s long lashes fluttered as she looked up at the black clouds. A single tear-trail traced a path down her cheek. “I thought of how he murdered my father. How he tormented my mother and brothers before killing them too. My mind went blank, and before I knew it, I had used the spear.”

Scáthach had not personally witnessed the razing of Faerzen. By royal decree, she had been studying in Six Kingdoms when the empire invaded. Several times, she had tried to hasten to her homeland’s defense, but every time, she had been stopped by her retainers. “His Majesty’s orders,” they had said as they implored her to keep herself concealed.

After Faerzen fell, Six Kingdoms had turned her out—although the two nations had once been allies, she had become too dangerous to protect. When at last she returned home, she had been greeted by a harrowing sight. The once-famed shopfronts of the royal capital stood in ruins, the houses of the residential districts were blackened and burned, the stench of rotting corpses befouled the air, and the people were abused like slaves by the imperial invaders. Her homeland had seemed condemned to a slow death beneath a conqueror’s boot—a fate that she could not and would not accept.

“If I had not chanced to meet you, I daresay I would have tried to fight the

entire imperial army by myself.”

Scáthach had been hellbent on vengeance, but Rache, who had been lying low in the capital at the time, had stopped her. It was from him that she had learned of her family’s fate. Her mother, the queen consort, had given her body to Buze in exchange for her younger brothers’ lives, while her father had offered his head in exchange for the people’s safety. The future administrator had kept neither promise. He had beheaded Scáthach’s brothers in front of the queen, then abused and killed her as she wept over their bodies.

“How my brothers must have suffered. How my mother must have grieved. I hear them, Rache. Night after night. They call out to me, commanding me to avenge them. In my dreams I see their faces, and they beg me to take his head.”

The hiss of the rain washed her sobs away, but her anger remained. In the depths of her tearstained eyes raged purest hellfire.

“I will die before I show him an ounce of mercy.”

She had taken up leadership of the Faerzen Resistance to avenge her mother and younger brothers’ murders. She would expel the empire from her homeland to honor her father and older brother’s memory.

“I was impressed by your restraint when we took the sixth princess,” Rache said. “I expected you to cut off her head.”

Scáthach’s brow furrowed. “I have my family’s pride to uphold. The royal line of Faerzen does not slay women and children.” Her voice softened from a declaration to a confession. “But it does sit ill with me to leave her in Draali hands. What say you?”

“I agree. I would prefer to take her into our own care...but we cannot afford to offend our allies. Their withdrawal would drastically weaken our position.”

“This Puppchen makes my skin crawl. And even setting my personal feelings aside, our alliance with him makes me uneasy. No doubt he seeks to use us to some private end.”

“Use us, you say...” Rache stroked his chin pensively. “For something beyond securing his position in his homeland, you mean?”

“Precisely. My doubts were small enough to ignore at first, but they have only grown with time.” Scáthach extended a hand from the cover of the tent and felt the patter of rain in her palm. “Tell me, why did he lend his aid to our cause?”

“Because of his peace accord with Steissen, no? He could not very well break it with the ink barely dry. Winning glory in Faerzen was the easiest way to silence his nobles’ complaints.”

“Even if he had to attack the empire to do so? That is not a trade many would accept.”

“Perhaps so, but it’s less suspicious when one considers that he had no other option.”

“Would a man who quails at noble dissent be bold enough to risk the fall of his entire nation?”

“Hm. True enough. Which would suggest that some third party is pulling his strings.” Rache nodded, affirming the notion to himself, and turned to look directly at Scáthach. “Six Kingdoms, perhaps?”

Six Kingdoms was a coalition of nations under a single high king, situated in a region known as Klim to the west of Faerzen. The high king’s bloodline claimed dominion over the entire coalition, so competition for the crown was fierce. Cutthroat politics was a fact of life as each kingdom strove to better its station by any means necessary.

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. I cannot be certain, but...”

There was no denying that everything was working to their benefit. If the Faerzen Resistance prevailed, Six Kingdoms would be the first to extend a helping hand, regardless of the fact that they had cast Scáthach out. The Resistance would be in no position to refuse, and Faerzen would be subject to occupation by yet another power. Meanwhile, if the empire proved victorious, Six Kingdoms could easily marshal its forces to drive the exhausted western nobles out of the region and back across the border. The two nations would go to war with Faerzen as their battleground, and Six Kingdoms would have the chance to ravage the imperial west without risking any of its own soil.

“Besides, the timing of Puppchen’s proposal was suspiciously convenient.”

If Scáthach was honest with herself, the Faerzen Resistance would have been routed if the Draali forces had not arrived when they had. The Warmaiden's schemes were fearsome indeed. The girl had made herself bait, feigning isolation in Fort Mitte to draw the Resistance out of hiding and crush them in one fell swoop. Scáthach had fallen for the ruse, suspending her guerrilla warfare campaign to gather her forces and lay down a siege. By the time she had realized she'd been tricked, the sixth princess had already shut the trap.

"It was only thanks to Puppchen's intervention that we survived the battle, let alone won it," she said. "True, we let the Warmaiden slip through our clutches, but that was a small price to pay for our lives."

"And that left us with no choice but to work with our benefactors," Rache agreed. "We could not even demand custody of the sixth princess."

"Indeed. I suspect that Puppchen intends to use her to strike a deal with Six Kingdoms. Either that or he will give them Faerzen as a token of his goodwill." Scáthach grimaced; it would be unwise to make any rash assumptions, but it was worth keeping such possibilities in mind. "Of course, we cannot discount the possibility that the empire has foreseen even that."

Rache sighed, pinching the furrow between his eyes. "I fear that peace for Faerzen is far off yet."

Scáthach nodded quietly. Everything had seemed so simple in the beginning—expel the empire, reclaim her homeland. Now she was beginning to see that victory would bring no end to the strife, only the looming specter of a new war.

"It seems the future holds nothing but more of the present."

Before she knew it, her homeland had become ensnared in all manner of plots and schemes. The web they formed was deep and dark, snarling a path that had once seemed straight into an ever more convoluted knot.

"Soon the rain will clear, but my heart remains clouded."

Scáthach lifted her eyes to the sky, where a single shaft of light pierced the darkness. The conflict had no end in sight, but the more she worried about where it might lead, the more entangled she grew.

She gazed up at the fort where the Warmaiden still held out, her thoughts

growing darker by the second. Just as she was about to succumb to despair, she slapped her cheeks to clear her mind. “I must not dwell on such things. First, I will take Buze von Krone’s head. There is no way but onward, step by step.”

“Indeed, Your Highness,” Rache said. “Leave tomorrow’s troubles for tomorrow. We still have battles to win today.”

“We must break the fort as soon as we can. At this stage, anything could happen.”

The Grantzian Empire, the Grand Duchy of Draal, and Six Kingdoms all had designs on Faerzen. Getting mired in a battle of attrition against the Warmaiden of all commanders would be disastrous.

“Soon we’ll launch an all-out assault. Until then, I want you to investigate Puppchen. If he tries anything, I want to be ready.”

“Understood, Your Highness.”

As Rache bowed his head, the sound of shouting rang out to their right.

“What’s that?” Scáthach asked. “A brawl, perhaps?”

Rache grimaced. “If so, I will see the guilty parties thoroughly disciplined. This is no time for squabbling.”

The pair set out in the direction of the jeers. A curious atmosphere hung over the camp, something complex and raw. They threaded their way through the soldiers’ tents until they came to the large, open space where the men ate their meals. Puppchen was there, as was his guard. He was announcing something to the Resistance soldiers, punctuating his speech with grandiose gestures.

“Come, come! Who will cast a stone? Or mud, if it takes your fancy! The rain’s left us with plenty! What brave man will step forward to seize this chance?!”

Behind his back stood a cage. Scáthach had seen it before and she would not soon forget it.

“I’ll do it!” a man cried. “The thrice-cursed imperials robbed me of my family!”

“Aye, and me!” shouted another. “The dogs killed my wife! Let’s see how they like losing what they love!”

A burned home. A kidnapped sister. A father tortured for trumped-up crimes. The soldiers' grievances were many. A crowd began to form around Liz's cage.

Puppchen cast a sly glance at Scáthach and brought his horse near. "Care to cast a stone, Your Highness? I'd wager a woman of your strength could take a finger clean off."

"What are you doing here, Lord Puppchen?"

"Oh, don't glare at me so. The sixth princess has been doing a wonderful job of raising my men's spirits. I simply wondered if your soldiers might care to join in the fun." He dismounted and picked up a rock from the ground with a childlike grin. "She has grown rather used to the pain, I'm afraid, but I'd fancy you could draw a fine scream from her yet."

He held out the rock to Scáthach, but she knocked his hand aside with unconcealed anger.

"It is ill-becoming to make sport of a prisoner."

"Why so angry? Your men seem pleased enough."

"Have you not an ounce of chivalry in your body? I'll hear no more of this." She stalked past him and rounded on the soldiers gathered around the cage, her face twisted in fury. "What do you think you are doing?! Abusing a prisoner? Is this how the proud defenders of Faerzen conduct themselves?!"

Her voice was loud enough to send a tremor through the air. The soldiers sprang away from the cage as though repelled, revealing its contents. Scáthach's jaw fell slack as she finally saw what lay within.

"What in the world?"

At first, she doubted her eyes. The cage was so full of broken bottles and stones of various sizes, she didn't immediately realize that there was anybody inside at all. Only after a moment did she see Liz kneeling buried in the debris.

"How awful..."

Rache joined her. His eyes widened and his hands flew to his mouth as he caught sight of the cage.

Liz's uniform was in tatters, sporting ragged tears all over, and the exposed

skin of her back was scored with deep lacerations. The cuts were too numerous to be anomalies. Most likely, her whole body was covered in similar injuries.

Only when Scáthach came closer did she realize how poor a state Liz was truly in. The princess was curled up, hugging her knees, but what was visible of her cheeks was drawn and sunken, as though she hadn't eaten in days. From her ragged breathing and heaving shoulders, she looked to be running a fever, most likely from an infected wound. Any ordinary woman would have been dead. The sheer extent of her maltreatment struck Scáthach dumb.

"Remarkable, is she not?" Puppchen chimed in. "How tenaciously she clings to life. Spiritblade wielders are monstrous indeed!"

"What possessed you to let her deteriorate like this?"

"Stripping away her Spiritblade's defenses requires breaking her will—a will which has proven frustratingly stubborn. So I have been wearing her down as best I can, to the extent that her blessing will allow." Puppchen's voice took on a gleeful edge. "And yet its power still persists! Astonishing. Even in this hideous state, she won't let me lay a finger on her. But there is only so long that will last."

A grin spread across his face.

"Her blessing is more powerful than I had anticipated, but its protection appears to exact a heavy toll on the body. Some of my soldiers had outlived their usefulness, so I ran some experiments. Its decline is clear. It is no longer potent enough to kill."

Puppchen's grin became an obscene leer. Scáthach's regard of him escalated beyond loathing and into fear.

"Your lips move," she said, "and yet I can make no sense of your words."

"Is that so? And here I thought I'd made it so simple for you. Well, no matter. I'd give her two more days before her Spiritblade rescinds its protection so as not to endanger her life. Once I've had my fun, she's yours to do with as you like. Lop off her head if it pleases you."

"I..." Scáthach paused to collect herself. "I do not recall you having such a grudge against her."

“Oh, but I do. Very much so. Do you not feel the same?”

“Do I what?”

“Please. You know very well what I mean. That spoiled brat never wanted for anything in her life, yet because she had the fortune, the sheer dumb *luck*, to be chosen by a Spiritblade, now the entire continent calls her hero! Doesn’t it just make you *sick*?! No brains, no talent, a cozy life served to her on a silver platter, and still she saunters about the field lecturing the rest of us from on high, all while the first emperor’s own sword wins her glories and accolades with naught but a flick of the wrist! Bah! I did only what the rest of the world *wishes* it could do!”

“That is jealousy, nothing more. You have lost your mind.”

“Oh, no. I’m quite sane. Hee hee... Ha ha ha ha ha! Quite sane! Rest assured, I’ll toy with her until I’ve had my fill!” He cast a lecherous gaze at Liz, his smile widening maniacally. “And once I have...oh, then the fun will truly begin. I can’t wait to see how she’ll weep!”

Monstrous, Puppchen had called the wielders of the Spiritblades.

Then what does that make you?

Scáthach could only watch in silence, astounded that a human being could be so vile.

* * * * *

Darkness lurked in the corners of the tent. The shroud of night had fallen, cold enough to chill flesh to the bone. An eerie wind howled outside.

Sleep had not come easily for the past few nights. Tiredness had failed to take him. His own body was rejecting the proposition, and he knew why. He was scared that if he did close his eyes, he would cease to be himself.

“Or maybe I just don’t want to face that dream again.”

He smiled ruefully as he gazed down at the map on the table, then retrieved a pen and ink and set about writing a letter by candlelight. The brisk *clack* of the pen settling down once he was done hung in the night air.

While the ink dried, he settled down and closed his eyes to meditate,

breathing deeply as though forcing back the madness rising up from his stomach.

The candle's flame guttered out.

All of a sudden, the tent fell into the grasp of darkness, leaving only the whistling of the wind. A sudden gust sent the flap fluttering. Through that slight gap slipped a sliver of moonlight. Hiro spotted something as the light fell on the table, and his fingers rose to his eyepatch. The stiff card he had received from Artheus was lying on the wood, where it had not been before.

A little of the card was still its original white. The rest had turned pitch black, as though it had been dipped in ink. A strange air swirled about it. Artheus had claimed that it was some kind of spirit seal, but Hiro was still none the wiser as to its function. He had searched through all manner of documents for clues but come away empty-handed.

After he had regained command of Excalibur's power at Berg Fortress, Artheus had appeared before him in a dream and explained that a "singular spirit" resided within the seal. If that spirit was now manifesting of its own accord, it clearly had a will of its own.

"It's more than just some lucky charm, that's for certain," he murmured to himself. "Not that Artheus would ever give me one of those."

Without knowing how it worked, his options were limited. At the very least, he had an idea of what was prompting its change in color. The big question was what would happen once it turned entirely black.

"I wonder whether you've handed me a blessing or a curse."

He gave a wry smile as Artheus's face flitted across his mind and tucked the card back into his pocket. For a long while after, he sat still, staring into the darkness.

* * * * *

The sky wept black rain. Ceaseless thunder shook the world, alongside something else between the peals—something like a wail of pain. Bodies lay sprawled on the ground in sickening abundance, and the earth was sown with broken swords.

Once, the castle had been as beautiful as it had been indomitable. Now, it no longer deserved either honor. Its front gate hung shattered. Its walls were crumbling. Flames wreathed the keep that had once been its pride and joy, a crackling symphony that set the hairs on end to hear.

Amidst the desolation stood Liz, looking around in confusion.

“Where...am I...?”

The last thing she remembered was being held captive by a cruel man named Puppchen. She looked down, and her eyes widened in surprise to see that her skin was unblemished. The wounds that she had received at his hands were nowhere to be seen.

“Is this...a dream?”

Yet the world around her seemed too vivid for that. The disquieting squelch of the mud beneath her feet, the cold wind tickling her skin, the stench of blood in her nostrils, the heat radiating from the blaze before her eyes—all of it felt too real. Unable to make sense of what was happening, she was left at a loss for what to do. The part of her convinced that everything was a dream clashed with the part certain it was reality, turning her mind into a confused mess—a state of affairs only worsened by the war-torn landscape, which assaulted her concentration and prevented her from consolidating her thoughts.

As she sank into desperation, the sword on her hip began to thrum. She looked down in surprise to see Lævateinn at her side. Its blade shone with crimson fire, as though urging her to pull herself together. A moment later, the glow transformed into a line of light, which extended toward the castle like a guiding finger.

“So I’m supposed to go in there?” she asked.

The Flame Sovereign didn’t respond.

“Fine. If you want me to go, I’ll go.”

With a shrug of resignation, she set out along the path indicated by the crimson light. Oddly, she felt no apprehension. Perhaps she had succeeded in convincing herself that she was only dreaming...or perhaps a part of her already sensed what lay in wait.

The doors to the white stone keep came into view as she passed through the burned-out gate. The courtyard was awash with blood. Scarlet droplets spattered the foliage. The flames from the keep had spread to the trees, setting them alight as well. Behind it all played the crash of collapsing masonry. It was, Liz thought, like looking into the mouth of hell.

Corpses lay scattered across the ground, reaching resentfully for the sky. No living lay among them. Questions abounded, but the most notable oddity was that there was no trace of the massacre's perpetrators. This was a world with no survivors. Some merciless onslaught had scoured it clean, bringing death indiscriminately to all things.

That truth remained as Liz ventured deeper into the keep, picking her way around piles of rubble. At last, she arrived at what looked like it had once been a throne room.

"Ah..."

She gulped at the sight. There was one survivor in this world after all, and he wore a familiar face.

Black hair as soft as silk. Black eyes as beautiful as obsidian. Features so gentle that one would think he would never hurt a fly. There was no mistaking it. He was identical to the boy she knew, down to his outdated military attire, right down to the amiable smile that he wore to conceal his thoughts.

"Hiro?"

Liz's pace unconsciously quickened. She had to see whether it was really him.

"What are you doing here? I don't understand..."

But she slowed to a halt as she grew closer, sensing a wrongness about him.

"Hiro?"

She fell silent. Her throat produced no sound. Her mind forgot to breathe. With eyes wide in trepidation, she looked down at the object in his hand.

It was a human head.

There was no telling who it had belonged to, but its expression was twisted in pain.

At last, Liz registered the unsettling noise that had been filling the chamber ever since her arrival. Her gaze lowered to its source, drawn by a dreadful inevitability. A pool of blood spread at the boy's feet. *Drip, drip, drip*, went the crimson droplets as they trickled down from the head's severed stump.

So quiet was the noise, she should never have heard it at all. A discordant roar filled the castle like the crackling of charcoal in the grate. Yet all sound seemed to fade away except that which issued from the boy, as though he and she were cut off from the rest of the world.

His lips parted and a laugh slipped forth. "Ha ha...ha...ha ha."

Despite his smile, his voice harbored a dreadful sadness. So painful was the sight that Liz felt compelled to comfort him; so violently did he shiver that she could not help but want to hold him. Yet, as the thought crossed her mind—

"Eh?!"

The boy's eyes swung up to meet hers, seizing her heart in a viselike grip.

"Took you long enough."

His voice was deathly cold. Its weight echoed in the pit of her stomach.

"I could topple countless castles...and I could cut down countless men..."

He wept as though expelling some vast inner pain.

"But never again will my heart run over."

The light had left his gaze. His heart was truly withered.

"I knew this wouldn't bring me any relief. I knew it only too well."

Only darkness swirled within the tearstained onyx of his eyes.

"But then...what am I supposed to do?"

He was so close to the edge, the slightest touch might push him over. Liz could not guess at what he might have suffered. All she knew was that, if she could help him in no other way, she at least wanted to offer him words of comfort.

"Don't you worry," she said. "I'll grow strong. Strong enough for you to depend on."

Strong enough that you won't have to cry anymore—or so she tried to say, but the castle shuddered violently before she could continue. Impacts rocked her body almost hard enough to knock her flat.

The world was coming down.

Rubble fell from the crumbled ceiling, raising clouds of white dust where it landed. Embers swirled like a blizzard, filling the air. As the castle fell apart around them, Liz hurriedly reached out to take the boy's hand.

"It'll be all right! I'll protect you! Just take my— Agh!"

Alas, her fingers grasped only empty air. More falling stone shook the castle, knocking her off-balance. For a moment, her eyes pitched down to the ground, and by the time she looked back up, an ocean of fire had erupted between them.

"Come back!"

She could feel the boy's presence receding.

"Hiro!"

The name sprang to her lips, but in truth, she could not even be certain that it was really him.

"Get back here!"

She willed herself to follow him, but her legs seemed to be rooted to the spot. She stretched out a desperate hand, but he was already far out of reach.

"Why won't you *move*?!" she snapped, staring down resentfully at her legs. "Of all the times... Hiro, wait!"

Over and over she called his name, refusing to give up hope, but the boy vanished into the sea of fire without a backward glance. She thumped her leg in frustration and looked around, racking her brains frantically. There had to be something she could do, some way to help him...

"Giving up so easily?"

An unfamiliar voice rang out from behind her. Its lofty timbre stood out in stark relief against this world glutted with death.

Slowly, fearfully, Liz turned around. There stood a young man. Haughty and imperious, arrogant and glorious, calm and collected—no word seemed quite enough to contain him. The gaudy silver and gold embroidery sewn into his old imperial military uniform was in hideous taste but, aggravatingly, it somehow suited him perfectly.

“A pity,” the young man continued. “I did not.”

“Who are you?” Liz asked.

He grinned, spreading his arms wide as though to emphasize his presence. “I am Leon Welt Artheus von Grantz, founder of the empire that will conquer the heavens themselves.”

It was a ridiculous claim, and yet it rang true. His voice, his manner, his bearing... All marked him as a ruler. Here was a true lion, a king among kings.

“Pick up your jaw, little lady. We have not much time.”

“B-But... *You’re* the first emperor?”

“Listen well, little lady. That boy you saw—”

“Hiro, right? I saw! He was just here, and he was so *sad*!”

All of a sudden, Liz realized that she could move again. She dashed up to Artheus, seized him by the shoulders, and shook him—or at least, she tried. The man did not move an inch except for the lips of his handsome face, which twitched into a crooked smile.

“Ha ha ha. You are an amusing one.”

“This is no time to be standing around laughing! We have to go and help him!”

“That I know all too well. But first, you must calm yourself.” Artheus laid a chastising hand on her head. “There is something I would ask of you. I shall only say it once, so listen well.”

“What?”

“You must save him.”

Beneath those four short words, Liz sensed a fathomless ocean. A flood of

regret crashed over her heart, so forceful that she thought her chest might split in two.

“To my shame,” Artheus continued, “I could not.”

“But how?” she asked.

“You will catch up to him someday. I know you have it in you. When that day comes, you will know what to do.” He ruffled her hair and stepped back with a smile. “And now I must bid you farewell.”

His lips curled into an impish grin, as though there was nothing more to be said.

“Hey! Wait!” Liz shouted after him. “You can’t just say your piece and leave!”

Artheus’s earnest eyes looked straight into her own. “It is a presumptuous thing I ask of you, this I know. But I must ask even so.”

His smile never faltered, but his expression seemed somehow desperately sad. On some instinctual level, Liz understood that he was lamenting his own powerlessness, that he wept for the fact that he could no longer save his friend.

“He is my brother, after all.”



He was just like Hiro, Liz realized with a start. He was suppressing his own emotions to maintain a veneer of calm.

The strange world she had found herself in gave her no time to dwell on that observation. She felt a surge of power swelling at her hip and looked down.

“Lævateinn? What are you—?”

A heartbeat later, a torrent of flame erupted from the crimson blade. The firestorm spread, rapidly engulfing Liz’s surroundings. The Spiritblade was trying to extract her from this world before it crumbled, she could tell, but she could not leave yet. She still had things left to accomplish.

“Don’t just stand there, do somethi— Hey, where’d you go?!”

She swung around, but the young man had disappeared. The space where he had been standing was covered in rubble. Apparently, leaving without so much as a goodbye was simply how things were done in this world.

She glared down at Lævateinn in frustration. “Stop that! I can’t leave yet! I have to go after Hiro!”

But her protests were in vain. The blade only flared brighter.

“Agh—”

Liz crossed her arms to shield her eyes from the glare, but it only grew. Soon, even her arms were no shield. It pierced her eyelids and scorched her eyeballs.

All of a sudden, the light receded. Liz gingerly opened her eyes. Darkness spread out before her, a world dyed as black as the abyss. For a moment, she wondered if her eyes might still be shut. The roar of the burning castle had faded away, leaving only the muted chirping of insects.

“Was that all...just a dream?”

It was hard to believe that it could have been real—but the grief in the black-haired boy’s face still lingered in her mind’s eye, and his whispered words still held her chest in that viselike grip. In the first place, it was unclear whether she was currently anywhere more real. She tried to raise herself to her feet to check, but—

“Ouch!”

Agony lanced through her fingers. She gritted her teeth and bore it. Tears welled in the corners of her eyes. The pain seemed to pull her back to reality; the slightest motion was enough to send her body into protest.

“Oww...”

She glanced down at her hand. The light was faint and flickering, but she could tell that her fingers were wrapped in bandages. Certainty that she was awake flooded through her as she saw the bloodstains on her fingertips. Those were the spots where Puppchen had pulled out her nails.

“Nnn...”

For a while she lay groaning as pain wracked her body.

“I see you’re awake,” said a voice from above.

Liz flinched at the sound. Her breath caught in her throat. The thought of being tortured again made her mind swim, but she could not let him win. Resolving not to break, she raised her head.

“Eh?”

What she saw left her blinking in surprise. It was not the man she had feared looking down at her, but somebody else.

“Rest assured, I am not Lord Puppchen. You need not stare at me with such terror.”

The lamplight hovered closer, picking the face of a young woman out of the darkness. Distantly, Liz supposed that her captor must be trying to see her better. She knew who this was, she realized: Culann Scáthach du Faerzen, the last surviving member of the Faerzen royal line. The woman’s face still had its usual cool composure, but it was oddly drawn, as though she had not slept.

“What do you want?” Mistrust flared in Liz’s eyes. She adopted a haughty demeanor, wary of letting any weakness show.

Scáthach, in contrast, only smiled wearily. “The night is chill. I thought you could make use of this.”

She extended a hand into the cage and passed Liz a thick woolen blanket.

“Is there something you want? Is that it?”

Liz scrutinized Scáthach’s face for any hint of an ulterior motive, but no matter how hard she stared, she could detect nothing more beneath the woman’s smile. The act of charity appeared to have been just that. Her eyes widened in surprise.

“Why would you be so kind to me?”

The last time the pair had met, Liz would have thought nothing of accepting Scáthach’s kindness. Now that she knew the woman’s true identity, however, she could not help but doubt the authenticity of the gesture. She was all too aware of Faerzen’s ill treatment at imperial hands, as well as the cruel fate of Scáthach’s family.

“This is no act of special kindness. I would offer the same to any prisoner, imperial princess or not.” Scáthach’s brow furrowed as she cocked her head at Liz. “Although I see that answer does not satisfy you.”

“Puppchen told me about you.”

“I see. Then I cannot fault your suspicions, I suppose.”

“Well, why wouldn’t I be suspicious? You have every reason to hate the empire.”

“You’re skirting the point. If you mean to say something, say it plain. I’ll listen.”

With a sigh, Scáthach stepped away from the cage. She returned a few moments later holding a chair, upon which she took a seat. She leveled her turquoise eyes at Liz, prompting her to continue.

There was no point in trying to feel one another out. Liz cut directly to the point. “I’m a princess of the empire. Shouldn’t you hate my guts?”

“I do hate you, if I am quite honest. More than a little. But I could never forgive myself if I took my anger out on a prisoner.”

Scáthach was evidently a woman of honor. There was no hint of falsehood in her words. At the very least, she appeared willing to engage with Liz honestly.

“Besides, tormenting you would bring me no relief. You are not an object of my vengeance.”

“Then who is?”

“What would you do if I gave you their names? Would you see justice done in my stead?”

“I’d want to help you. Insofar as I could.”

That claim held little weight coming from a prisoner, but it was true nonetheless. If Liz were freed, she intended to conduct an investigation into what she had learned and support Faerzen to the best of her ability. If that meant punishing soldiers who had failed to uphold military protocol—or their commanders—then they would be punished.

“You are kind, and your heart is pure. Qualities wasted on the name of von Grantz.” Something glimmered in Scáthach’s eyes that might have been admiration before she shook her head as though to refute it. “But that alone is not enough. You lack for station. If you truly wish to punish these fiends for their depravity, you must ascend to the highest echelons of power and bring about change from above.”

“Are your enemies really that powerful?”

If rising to the very top of the empire was truly the only way to thwart them, it was not hard to guess the final goal of Scáthach’s vendetta.

“Unless, of course,” the woman continued, “you were to renounce your titles and take up arms against your homeland. Do you have that resolve?”

“I...” Liz searched for an answer and fell silent as she realized that she did not have one.

“Many things can be solved through kindness alone, but for some, only violence will suffice. If you have not the will to use it, you ought not offer your allegiance so readily.”

Scáthach’s words struck home like hammer blows. If Liz had surmised correctly where the woman’s spear was pointed, there truly was no way but rebellion—but that would destroy everything that she had worked so hard to

build. It would be a harsh road, and those she cared about would not be shielded from harm. With neither the power to bring change from within nor the resolve to forsake Hiro and the rest of her allies, she was helpless to bring the guilty to justice. Her bold words had been just that—words. She ground her teeth and looked down in shame.

“Sixth Princess Celia Estrella Elizabeth von Grantz of the Grantzian Empire.”

Her own name rang in the silence like a small pebble falling into a still pool. She looked up. Scáthach had fallen to one knee before the cage and bowed her head.

“I apologize if my words have offended you. You are the bearer of a pure and noble heart, and I would not see it tarnished.” The woman’s lips pulled into the faintest of smiles, as alluring and beautiful as a wildflower blooming on a vast plain. “Lend not your hand to a vagabond such as I, lest you find it stained with blood. My vengeance is mine to deliver.”

The expression was gone so quickly that Liz doubted her eyes. Even as she questioned what she had seen, Scáthach reasserted her usual stoic mask.

“Even if you were empress, I would still have turned you down.” Scáthach closed her eyes, walked over to a nearby table, and returned with a wooden bowl. “I have nothing more to say, and I would ask nothing more of you,” she said, offering the bowl through the bars. “Here. Eat. It’s grown a little cold, but you must be hungry.”

Liz said nothing. Scáthach’s unexpected apology and the abrupt end to the conversation had left her uncertain what to say.

“It’s not poisoned, if that’s what you fear. Although I would not fault you if you did not believe me.” Scáthach glanced at the spoon and her shoulders slumped. “I only offer you food for want of silver, I assure you, but I understand your trepidation.”

Having completely misinterpreted Liz’s silence, she scratched her head awkwardly, clearly at a loss.

“It’s all right. I believe you.” Liz all but swiped the bowl away and gulped the soup down. She grimaced in pain as it touched the cuts inside her mouth.

Scáthach laughed. “You are an amusing one. But there’s no need to eat quite so quickly. Nobody is going to take it away from you.”

She took a seat on the chair and watched affectionately as Liz ate. “I had a sister your age, you know. She was kind, like you. And like you, she was out to prove that anything a man could do, she could do better.”

The woman’s eyes softened as they turned toward bygone days.

Liz could not bring herself to reply. Scáthach’s sister had returned to her as a corpse, she knew, having died the most horrific of deaths. Just how deep must the woman’s anger run? Could Liz have endured the horrors she had suffered? The minutes passed in silence, with Liz poring over questions and finding no answers.

“Thank you,” she said at last as she set down her empty bowl.

“You can have another helping if you’d like.”

“I’m quite full. But I appreciate it.”

She passed the bowl back through the bars. Silence fell over the tent as the conversation came to a halt. For a long while, neither spoke, but Scáthach made no move to leave. She remained in the chair, staring listlessly at Liz.

“I have one last question for you,” she said at last.

“Go ahead.”

“What was it that you were dreaming about?”

Liz’s first instinct was to lie. Why Scáthach had asked that, she did not know, but the subject of her Spiritblade was best not raised lightly. Lævateinn’s rarity made it particularly attractive to a large number of people—not least, would-be “researchers” like Puppchen.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t remember.”

“If you do not wish to say, I will not force you.” Scáthach didn’t seem offended by the attempt to avoid the question. She continued evenly. “But allow me to offer you one warning: do not delve too deep or you will find yourself unable to return.”

Liz blinked. “How did you know?”

“I suppose I’ll tell you plain. Hiding the truth would only make matters more confusing. I too wield a Spiritblade.”

Scáthach curled her right hand in empty air. Fine motes of light swirled around her fingers before flaring with a sudden light. A spear appeared in her grasp. It was an exquisite weapon, with a haft of clear azure and an iridescent head that shone as though it were encrusted with jewels.

“Gáe Bolg,” Liz breathed. “The Boreal Sovereign. I thought I sensed something, but I couldn’t be sure...”

She gazed at the spear with no small amount of surprise. Never once in history had a Spiritblade Sovereign chosen a master from outside the empire. While it was possible that such individuals had existed and simply never been recorded, at the very least, when one opened a textbook they would find only the names of Grantzian royalty.

“As for why it chose me, I could not say...but that is a matter for another time. We were talking about your dream. Although...” Scáthach pursed her lips, having seemingly remembered something. She set a hand to her chin as she looked between Lævateinn and Liz. “Before we do, tell me. Are you aware that the Spiritblades possess wills of their own?”

Liz agonized over whether to respond, but at last, with a sigh, she gave up on her facade. There wasn’t much point trying to keep secrets from a fellow Spiritblade wielder.

“I am. Enough to know that Lævateinn’s a cheeky little rascal.”

The Spiritblade Sovereigns had originally been fashioned by Emperor Artheus from power gifted to him by the Spirit King. As their name suggested, each harbored a spirit’s consciousness.

“Still,” Liz continued, “I can only sense what she’s thinking. I can’t speak to her. Yet, anyway.”

The Spiritblades only appeared to the individuals they acknowledged as their masters. Should anybody attempt to manifest them by force, they would retaliate with a terrible curse, but to their rightful wielders, they conferred

great power. For that reason, they were also called the *regalo*—or “gift”—of the Spirit King.

“I see,” Scáthach replied. “Gáe Bolg is...willful. Quick to sulk and difficult to command.”

The stronger the wielder’s desires, it was said, the more power their Spiritblade would concede. Uncommonly fervent convictions could push the weapons to even greater heights. The key, however, lay in how closely the wielder’s heart resonated with the weapon. Strong conviction alone would not suffice—one also had to deeply understand their weapon and gain its trust.

“The Spiritblades can bestow tremendous power, but their wielders must be able to withstand it. Their might is more than human bodies were ever meant to bear. To call upon it even once exacts a heavy toll.” Scáthach paused, noticing that Liz was frowning. “Do you understand so far?”

“I’m fine. I think I’m following.”

“To the matter at hand, then. I shall say it plain: you must not delve too deep.”

“Are you saying you’ve gone further than I have?”

“So I suspect. Hence my warning. The deeper you delve into a Spiritblade’s domain, the more frequently it will show you memories of its previous wielders. Such memories provide invaluable insights into its nature, but spend too long among them and you risk losing yourself, becoming nothing more than an empty shell.”

“You’ve seen them too?”

“I have. To glean insights from the minds of a Spiritblade’s former wielders is the most effective way to master its power. But Gáe Bolg has had several masters, so it flits easily between them. The strain of each individual recollection is not so great. Your Spiritblade, however, has known only one other.”

“Emperor Artheus?”

“Precisely. Hence, I fear for your well-being. To glimpse such memories is to

understand them and make them a part of yourself, but the memories of Emperor Artheus are likely beyond an ordinary human's comprehension. To witness them may very well destroy your mind."

"But wasn't every Spiritblade originally wielded by Artheus? Can't you see his memories too?"

"No. Or, to speak more precisely, I cannot yet delve that deep."

With the exception of Lævateinn, which had only ever chosen Artheus, and Excalibur, which was lost, the Spiritblades had all taken multiple masters over their thousand years of existence. The older the master, it seemed, the deeper within its domain their memories could be found.

"Yet in your case, Emperor Artheus was your direct predecessor—so you face the lord of the labyrinth from your very first step. For that reason, I suspect Lævateinn to be the most trying of the Spiritblades to master."

If Scáthach's words were to be believed, the mirror image of Hiro that Liz had seen could only have been Emperor Schwartz himself. Moreover, she must have been looking through Artheus's eyes. It had not seemed as though she was witnessing a parting—but then, what *had* happened between them?

"In any case," Scáthach concluded, "consider yourself warned. And take better care in future."

Liz's ears pricked up at that. "Can I ask you something? How did you know I was dreaming?"

"Because when I came in, Lævateinn was on the point of running wild."

"What?"

"I had to use Gáe Bolg to wake you."

Liz's eyes went wide with astonishment at that, but she had no time to dwell on it. At that moment, she sensed somebody approaching the tent and tensed defensively.

Scáthach had noticed the same thing. Her fingers tightened around Gáe Bolg. "Who's there?" she called with more than a trace of hostility.

Outside, footsteps shifted on gravel. "Rache du Vertra, Your Highness. Lord

Puppchen requests your presence.”

“Understood. I’ll be there forthwith.”

Although the tension instantly dissipated, the mention of Puppchen’s name left Liz staring at the tent flap with a new kind of apprehension.

Scáthach turned to face her with a comforting smile. “Worry not. On my pride as a knight, he will not torment you again.” She tossed Liz the blanket. “Rest and recover. You shall not be disturbed.”

She excused herself and left the tent at a half-run. Liz wrapped the blanket around herself and closed her eyes.

Hiro...

How worried he must be. She felt awful for the trouble she must be causing him. The next time they met, she swore, it would be with a smile, and she would throw her arms around him with no care for the pain of her wounds. Never again did she want him to wear the sorrowful expression he had in her dream. No more did she want him to be ruled by grief.

She had to be stronger. She had to better herself, thoroughly, so that she would never trouble him again. As Artheus had once fought by Schwartz’s side, so she would fight by his, as a comrade and an equal.

Cerberus will be in such need of a bath...

The white wolf hated water with a vengeance, so she would not be bathing of her own accord. Tris could not be trusted either; Cerberus had him wrapped around her little paw.

I hope they’re both all right...

Liz had sent them both away from the battlefield, so they should have been. Knowing that Tris had a strong sense of duty, she had entrusted him with Cerberus, directed him to command a unit with a significant number of wounded, and instructed him explicitly to join forces with Third Prince Brutahl.

Once we’re all back together, we can work on righting the situation in Faerzen.

Her capture had taught her things she might otherwise never have learned.

Perhaps the Spirit King himself had guided Draal to take her prisoner, all to teach her about the darkness that lurked within the empire. Now, it was up to her to do the right thing with the knowledge she had gained.

I will right this wrong...even if it means confronting Father.

Her resolve had faltered earlier in the face of Scáthach's question, but now her heart was set. She sank into slumber, knowing that tonight, she would sleep a little more peacefully.

Chapter 4: The Wrath of the War God

The seventeenth day of the eleventh month of Imperial Year 1023

Handhaven's twenty-thousand-strong force took up position at Fort Terminus, three sel from Hiro's encampment. There they remained, watching but not attacking. They were either waiting to see how the Crow Legion reacted or just being cautious. Regardless, it was clear that Hiro had been given time to think—so the day found him sitting alone in his command tent, silently pondering how to proceed.

"Your Highness," came a voice.

He tilted his head and cracked open one eye. The voice was familiar, but its formal tone came as a surprise. He looked toward the entrance to see Garda, as expected, but employing the particular stiff manner that he only adopted around the troops or in the presence of nobility or dignitaries. At his sides were Huginn and Muninn, and behind them waited the reason for his reticence: an unfamiliar man. Hiro did not recognize the newcomer, but his attire was not the uniform of the imperial military; his features, too, clearly marked him as an outsider to the empire.

Mistaking Hiro's lack of a response for inattention, Garda bowed his head a second time. "Your Highness, I bring an emissary from the Grand Duchy of Draal."

So that was how they were playing it. Hiro couldn't deny a slight feeling of surprise, but he made certain not to let it show as he waved the man in.

The emissary stepped forward and sank to one knee, bowing his head politely. "Allow me to introduce myself, Your Highness. I am Eguze von Martina, a general of Draal and a humble servant of His Highness, Lord Handhaven. It is an honor to make the acquaintance of one so illustrious as the fourth prince of the empire. Even here, we have heard tell of the exploits of Lord Hiro Schwartz von Grantz."

“There’s no need to bow, General von Martina. We’re all equal on the battlefield.” Hiro paused. “So what brings you here?”

Von Martina gave a solemn nod and stood up straight. “Right to business, I see. Very well. I am told that you took several of our nobles captive not three days ago.”

“You have heard correctly. We have the individuals in custody.”

“I have come to offer you a ransom in exchange for their release.”

General von Martina produced a folded sheet of paper and handed it to him. Hiro’s expression turned dubious as he unfolded it. One eyebrow rose. The sum written within was more than enough for a ransom. Perhaps Handhaven simply valued his nobles highly, but such an extravagant price per head suggested some kind of ulterior motive.

“We can procure the necessary funds by the morrow,” General von Martina continued. “Until then, we swear not to engage in hostilities. Shall I tell my lord that you accept?”

This von Martina was a bold man to ride alone into the middle of an enemy encampment. Moreover, he clearly had Handhaven’s trust—in addition to the ransom offer, the letter stated that any harm to the messenger would be met with force.

The big question was why Handhaven was willing to part with so much coin for the nobles’ safe return. As Hiro studied von Martina’s expression, he noticed something: the emblem on the breast of the man’s uniform matched the standard he had found in the mud three days prior. Considering to whom he owed his allegiance, that could only mean one thing.

“Is that the crest of Lord Handhaven you wear, General?” Hiro asked, pointing.

Von Martina furrowed his brow, perturbed by the change in topic, but he quickly realized that he could not ignore the question. “Indeed it is, Your Highness,” he said with a resigned nod. “What of it?”

“Nothing. It just struck me that I’ve seen it before.”

A piece fell into place inside Hiro's mind. If the captured nobles had carried a standard bearing that same symbol, they likely belonged to the faction backing Handhaven, which meant that taking them back to the empire as hostages would weaken the man's support base. To his other noble patrons, such an event would be disastrous—so disastrous that they would gladly part with a large sum to avoid it.

Hiro decided on his reply. "I regret to inform you that I cannot return our prisoners," he said.

Von Martina made no attempt to hide his bafflement. "On what grounds?" he blustered, advancing on Hiro with a rapidly reddening face. "Surely you cannot find our offer lacking?"

Garda and Muninn seized him by the shoulders. "I must ask you to keep your distance from His Highness," the former growled.

Hiro raised a hand to his eyepatch. All was going to plan. He had known in his gut that taking the nobles alive had been the correct decision, and now it had paid off. "A matter this important must be settled between commanders," he explained.

"You would have me bring Lord Handhaven here in person?" Von Martina sounded mortified by the prospect. "I fear he would agree to no such thing. There would be no guarantee of his safety. Is that not precisely why I am here in his stead?"

Hiro gestured for the man to be silent. "That isn't what I said. I will go to meet with *him*. In person."

If von Martina had been scandalized before, he was now slack-jawed. He stared back with a stupefied expression, trying to divine Hiro's intentions, but he mustn't have been able to glean very much, because eventually he gave up with a sigh of resignation.

"Permit me to ask you one question," he sighed. "Are you quite mad?"

Hiro shook his head, raising a hand to his mouth so that von Martina could not see his smile. "Perfectly sane, I assure you. Do you have a problem with my offer?"

Von Martina looked down for a moment, pondering. At last, he met Hiro's gaze again with a look of consternation. "I fear that this is a decision too great for a humble vassal such as I. Would you permit me to return to Fort Terminus and discuss the matter with Lord Handhaven?"

"If you want, but I'll need an answer by nightfall."

"It shall be done, Your Highness. I shall depart immediately." Von Martina bowed low and hurried out of the tent.

As soon as the man was gone, Garda turned an incredulous gaze to Hiro. "You must have a death wish. You mean to walk alone into a nest of your enemies?"

"That's right. Is that a problem?"

"We all know you fight like a champion, Your Lordship," Huginn interrupted, "but that's a tall order even for you."

Muninn was quick to back his sister up. "She's got the right of it. At least bring someone who can watch your back."

A shrug was Hiro's only reply.

Garda pinched the furrow between his eyebrows. "I understand that you fear for the sixth princess, but this is reckless even for the One-Eyed Dragon. They have twenty thousand men. Not even you could claim that many heads."

Perhaps now's the time to put that to the test, Hiro almost remarked, but he bit it back. This was no time for wisecracks. His three retainers were looking at him with concern, earnestly worried about his safety. It was only fair to engage with them honestly.

With a sigh, he explained himself. "If you think I'm rushing things, honestly, you might be right. Even a part of me thinks I'm being rash. But something tells me that we can't afford to waste any more time. There's no point in asking me why, it's just a gut feeling, but please trust me on this."

"Be that as it may," Garda said, "they'll not let you waltz into their fort as you please. What if you get yourself captured like the princess?"

"Maybe they really will be able to negotiate. And if they aren't, I'll come back with Handhaven and von Martina's heads."

Garda snorted. “Bold as ever. I sense you’ll not be dissuaded.”

“What can I say? I’ve got a stubborn streak.”

Garda lowered himself into a nearby chair, folded his arms, and closed his eyes. His mouth was pursed in dissatisfaction, but he seemed to have realized that he was fighting a losing battle. Hiro felt bad for forcing the issue, but this was one point on which he would not back down.

Huginn approached, a frown creasing her brow. “Be careful, Your Lordship. If something does go wrong, we’ll be there faster than you can blink.”

“I appreciate that,” Hiro said. Privately, however, he felt confident that the negotiations would succeed. The Draali forces were probably falling over themselves laughing at what an idiot he was. He would have to show them just how wrong they were.

My apologies, Lord Handhaven, but I won’t be pulling any punches.

Hiro’s eyes narrowed savagely, his mouth curling into a half-moon smile. His expression was at once the face of a strategist spinning a scheme and of a predator closing in on its prey—a face that a snake might wear.

Perhaps half an hour later, a Draali emissary arrived at the camp—not von Martina, but some other dignitary.

“I am your escort, Your Highness,” the man explained.

Hiro’s eyebrows rose. “I assume this means Lord Handhaven is willing to negotiate?”

“I know only that I have been ordered to see you to the fort, Your Highness. Rest assured that no harm will befall you along the way.”

Reassurances of safety naturally rang hollow from an enemy. As Hiro adopted a conflicted expression, Garda leaned in to whisper in his ear.

“I will make the men ready, just in case,” the zlostá grunted. “Don’t get yourself killed.”

“I won’t. You can manage by yourself while I’m gone, I trust.”

“Are you ready to depart, Your Highness?” the emissary asked.

“Of course.”

Hiro climbed into the emissary’s carriage. The sun was sinking over the flat horizon as Garda and the siblings saw him off, leaving the vehicle to find its way by the sunset’s lingering glow.

After a while, they came to the Draali encampment, a sprawling affair resulting from the soldiers that Fort Terminus was too small to accommodate spilling out around its walls. Dinner must have been announced, because many of them sat around with wooden bowls in their hands, conversing. Others were focusing on training or maintaining their arms. All in all, it made for a peaceful sight, but as the carriage drew closer to the fort, the atmosphere transformed into something more menacing.

“They’ve certainly rolled out the welcome carpet,” Hiro murmured to himself. “Looks like they aren’t planning on letting me leave quietly if negotiations break down.”

Ranks of soldiers lined both sides of the road. Their freshly sharpened weapons glinted dully in the fading light, and their heavy armor seemed to promise that he would have no easy return.

At last, the carriage stopped before the gates of the fort, and Hiro was made to disembark alone. A wave of surprise ran through the soldiers above the gate as he stepped out into the open—they probably hadn’t believed that he would really come. Countless eyes studied him with suspicion.

They’ve got archers hidden behind the battlements. In case I try to run, probably.

He glanced back over his shoulder. The ranks of heavy infantry held their spears at the ready. The air was stretched so taut that the slightest wrong move might invite bloodshed.

As tension hung heavy, the gate opened and two men emerged. The one behind was General von Martina. In front of him walked a portly figure with stubby limbs and a swollen belly reminiscent of an ogre. A charitable observer might call his flabby face kindly; a less charitable one might have said “weak-

willed.” This, presumably, was Handhaven, the grand duke’s second son.

“I-I must say,” the man stammered, “your visit comes as quite the surprise.”

“Hiro Schwartz von Grantz of the Grantzian Empire. It’s an honor.” Hiro held out his hand with a welcoming smile.

“P-Please, the honor is all mine! Ah...introductions! Of course! I am Handhaven von Draal of the Grand Duchy of Draal!”

Hiro politely ignored the trembling in Handhaven’s fingers as the pair shook hands, and let his smile relax into something more reassuring. “Not to hurry you, but shall we begin?”

“O-Of course! Please, right this way.”

Handhaven turned to head back into the fort. Hiro made to follow, but von Martina stepped into his way, one hand laid pointedly on the pommel of his sword.

“Back a little, if you please. I will not risk you taking my lord hostage.”

It was a sensible request. Hiro nodded in assent and filed in behind von Martina.

As the group passed through the gate, a wave of air washed over them from behind, sending Hiro’s hair fluttering and the Black Camellia flapping wildly. He turned around to confirm what he already knew: the gate had slammed shut.

“What is the meaning of this?” he demanded.

As he looked around, soldiers dashed out from their hiding places in the shadow of the walls to surround him with long-handled spears. Hundreds of bows trained hundreds of arrows on him from the battlements above his head.

“W-We will undertake negotiations here, Lord Hiro,” Handhaven stammered.

“Fine. Let’s hear your demands.”

“As long as you don’t resist, y-you will not be harmed. You...you will be taken captive and traded for the lives of my retainers.”

“That’s your plan?” Hiro asked.

“Eh?” Handhaven’s eyes went wide in surprise. Whatever response he had

expected, it wasn't that. "What do you mean?"

"Do you really think you can capture me with *this*?"

Handhaven looked at von Martina in his confusion. "Eguze, what do I say?"

Hiro leveled a finger at him with an exasperated sigh. "You're the negotiator here, Lord Handhaven."

"B-But..."

The man was evidently nothing more than a typical fainthearted nobleborn. A lifetime of looking to others for approval had left him entirely incapable of making a single decision for himself. It was little wonder that a faction had sprung up around him. Should he come to power, his backers would not only be able to influence his decisions, they would effectively control the nation from the shadows.

The question, then, was under whose instructions Handhaven was currently operating. They would have to be an individual of status, and someone to whom the man would be first to look for advice. Here, in this place, only one candidate fit that description: the man by Handhaven's side, shaking his head with his hand pressed to his brow. General von Martina.

"If you want to take me prisoner, you're welcome to try," Hiro said, "but first, you should read this."

He fished through his pockets and produced a letter, which he tossed through the air so that it landed at von Martina's feet. The general looked back at him suspiciously.

"Read it," Hiro said again. "Before we go any further."

Von Martina's lips pursed. He stared at the letter for a long moment as though it might explode but nevertheless irritably picked it up and passed it to Handhaven. "You ought to be the one to read it, my lord."

"M-May I?"

"You may."

Permission thus obtained, Handhaven silently read through the letter. Halfway through, he let out a gasp and looked up at Hiro with wide eyes.

“Is something the matter?” Hiro asked.

“General? General, you must see this!”

Von Martina took the letter. His eyes blurred as he quickly scanned it, and his nostrils flared.

“If you’re done,” Hiro said, “let’s start our negotiations. I do hope we can come to an understanding.”

His lips pulled back into a savage smile, like a wild beast revealing its true colors, and he raised one hand. Excalibur appeared from nothingness in a flash of blinding light and settled into his palm. That was not all, however. With a noise like reality tearing, countless rents scored the air around him. A sudden, violent wind sent the Black Camellia dancing for joy.

“You will find my demands there. Personally, I think they’re quite reasonable.”

The soldiers stared in astonishment—or rather, in fear at the change that had come over him, as though he were a monster walking in their midst.

“General? What is he doing?!” Handhaven cowered as the gale ravaged the courtyard.

Von Martina looked stupefied. His men turned to him for orders, but he didn’t seem to hear them. Uproar spread through the enemy troops like a ripple across a pond. The archers on the ramparts had retreated behind the battlements for fear of being swept off the walls.

“Wh-What *is* he?!” In the face of the otherworldly scene and Hiro’s overpowering might, Handhaven’s forehead began to gush sweat.

Von Martina collected himself enough to stare Hiro down, with a trembling hand laid on the hilt of his sword. “We have the numbers!” he barked at the nearby soldiers. “Do not falter! There are over ten thousand Draali troops outside the walls! What have we to fear from one man?!”

Handhaven sank to the ground, trembling. Hiro approached the man and stood over him. “I would like your answer, Lord Handhaven. Do you agree to my terms?”

“I agree! You can have everything you want! Now cease this foul sorcery!”

Pure despair settled over the man’s soul. The might emanating from Hiro was vast enough to extinguish all hope.

Hiro leaned over and laid a hand on Handhaven’s head. “Then we have a deal?”

“Y-Yes...although there is one thing I must ask.”

“And what is that?”

“The settlements that you burned on the border... My soldiers and my people will demand restitution.” Handhaven’s voice wavered. “On this I cannot back down, even if my head should roll for it.”

That was only to be expected. Hiro nodded in assent, then lifted Handhaven under the arms and lightly pulled the corpulent man to his feet. “Unfortunately, I don’t recall burning any settlements.”

“Y-You don’t? But...” Handhaven looked around in confusion, casting a desperate glance at von Martina.

“That cannot be.” Von Martina made no attempt to disguise his anger. He glared at Hiro with murder in his eyes. “We have the word of the nearby garrison, of the townsfolk themselves! All say that you burned their homes!”

Hiro met the man’s ire with a nonplussed expression and a dismissive wave. “Did they see the flames rise with their own eyes?”

“Of course! The reports explicitly mentioned smoke rising from the— Ah!” Von Martina’s eyes went wide as he spotted the trick.

“Smoke, yes. But no fire.”

“Eh? What do you mean by that?” Handhaven looked between Hiro and von Martina in evident confusion.

Hiro took pity on him and decided to explain. “It’s quite simple. That was a ruse, nothing more.”

“A ruse?”

“It wasn’t the towns that I burned, only kindling. The townsfolk I took captive

have all been freed. By now, they should all have returned to their ordinary lives.”

It would violate Hiro’s principles to harm the innocent. From the beginning, he had never intended to burn any homes—but he hadn’t been above pretending otherwise. First, he had evacuated all witnesses from the area. The rest of his work had been done by freed townsfolk and defeated soldiers, who fled to nearby villages and towns, spreading fear, terror, and warnings of the Crow Legion’s cruelty.

“Of course, it doesn’t matter if I reveal my tricks now. After all, their purpose, Lord Handhaven, was to draw you out.”

“All that subterfuge, just for the sake of creating this very moment.” Von Martina trembled with anger as he realized the extent of the deception.

Hiro smiled, raising a taunting finger to his lips. “Exactly. All to bring you to the negotiating table.”

“Enough of this farce!” The man’s fury exploded. With a roar of rage, he bore down on Hiro, steel glinting in his hand—but he was far too slow. He might as well have been wading through tar.

“Agh!”

Hiro knocked von Martina’s sword from his hands and pinned him to the ground. “Well,” he remarked, “what now?”

He looked around, keeping the struggling general restrained with one hand. The Draali soldiers seemed reluctant to approach. They glanced at Handhaven for orders, but the man was too shell-shocked to give any commands—or at least, so Hiro had assumed, but he was proven wrong. With knees trembling and voice cracking, Handhaven sank into a bow.

“A-A moment, Lord Hiro. Please forgive General von Martina’s indiscretion.”

Von Martina’s eyes went just as wide as Hiro’s. “My lord...” the general breathed.

“He has always served me faithfully. I-If you take his life...” Handhaven raised a trembling finger to point at Hiro. “Then I will consider our agreement void.”

Dozens of arrowheads swiveled toward Hiro.

“It seems your lord has made his choice,” Hiro said to von Martina. “What about you?”

“I...” The general eyed Excalibur’s blade at his throat and grimaced bitterly. “If that is Lord Handhaven’s decision, I will obey.”

Hiro relaxed his hold on von Martina, stepped away, planted his hands on his hips, and stretched. “Good. I’m glad this didn’t have to end in bloodshed. It’s always nice when negotiations go smoothly.” He glanced at Handhaven for a word of agreement, but the man only coughed awkwardly and nodded. “Now, I have some questions for you about the sixth princess. Your brother captured her, I think? I’d like you to tell me *everything* you know.”

“I-I fear that is very little,” Handhaven stammered. “I can tell you that one of my brother’s letters boasted of her capture, but he has mentioned nothing of her since.”

“That’s the truth, is it?”

Von Martina answered in place of his simpering lord, one hand still pressed to his aching neck. “Lord Puppchen has always been possessive of his toys, particularly with regard to his brother. He never let Lord Handhaven lay so much as a finger on his newest obsessions. I expect that he has developed a similar fascination with your princess.”

Hiro’s eyebrows rose. “Meaning?”

“He will toy with her until he is bored—which is to say, until she breaks. If you are to save her, you must hurry. I fear that Lord Puppchen was born...lacking some part of his humanity, shall we say.”

“I see.” Hiro did his best to maintain a veneer of calm, but a maelstrom of urgency and panic had arisen within his chest. “And he is still in Faerzen?”

“N-No, Your Highness. He has written to say that he is returning imminently. He means to trap you between his forces and ours.”

If the Draali forces were coming home, they would likely bring Liz with them—in which case, the logical move was to lay an ambush for this Puppchen and

steal her back.

“How many men does he have?”

“He left with over thirty thousand,” Handhaven stuttered, “but clashes with Third Prince Brutahl will have whittled down his numbers. I expect he now has no more than twenty.”

“Lord Handhaven.” Hiro turned to face the man. “You want to be the next grand duke, correct?”

“I... Yes, I suppose I do, but...”

“Then I’d like you to do me a favor.” His smile made it clear that refusal was not an option.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, the increasingly ferocious fighting over Fort Mitte was coming to a crescendo. Resistance archers loosed great clouds of arrows that vanished into the fort, but the imperial chain of command was holding firm, and results were unexpectedly meager. A more direct approach fared little better; attempts to push through and put up ladders invariably met with heavy losses. Any men who successfully scaled the walls were quickly driven back, and their ladders were kicked down after them.

“This failure is mine,” Scáthach said bitterly. “I had too much contempt for our enemy. And I thought too highly of my own strength.”

Things had initially gone so smoothly that she had thought nothing of initiating the siege. Three days, she had expected, before her exhausted enemy yielded and the fort fell—and indeed, were it not for the Warmaiden, the battle would long have been won. Scáthach should have been bringing the fight to Third Prince Brutahl by now and driving the imperial forces from her homeland for good. The thought made her shoulders slump.

“I cannot falter now,” she said with a shake of her head. “Too many men are risking their lives for their faith in me.”

It was thanks to those same men’s brave efforts that the Resistance was now so close to victory.

“If I had met her under different circumstances, I would have liked to discuss strategy with this Warmaiden.”

Rache glared vengefully up at the fort. “It seems that it will not fall today, Your Highness.”

“Always on the cusp of victory, yet never quite there, and today marks our fiercest effort yet. If even that is not enough...”

What sorcery the imperials were employing to hold out, only their gods knew. They had entered the fort with fewer than five thousand men, including wounded. Of those, no more than two thousand could still be in fighting shape. It was entirely possible that none remained unscathed at all.

“Soon the sun will set,” Rache observed. “We might attempt a night raid, but I expect it would bear little fruit.”

The enemy did not allow the dark to make them negligent. Every night, without fail, they lit bonfires along the walls and sent sentries to patrol the battlements. What training they must have endured to fight without sleep, Scáthach could only guess, but to attack such a well-defended emplacement would clearly be to the Resistance’s disadvantage. They would only incur needless losses, possibly so many that they could no longer face Third Prince Brutahl.

“Perhaps so, but we do not have the luxury of sitting on our haunches.” With no more time to wait the enemy out, Scáthach was growing anxious. “How long before the third prince arrives?”

Before daybreak, word had arrived from their spies that Brutahl was on the move.

“Four days if our task force succeeds in delaying him, two if it does not. In his urgency, he rides with only fifteen thousand men.” Rache’s expression was grave, lined with visible vexation. “But ours now number fewer than thirteen, wounded included. Hardly more than ten without our task force. Even the numbers game is turning against us.”

They had intended to corner their foes here, only to find themselves the ones with their backs against the wall. If they had only left the Warmaiden in her fort

and challenged Prince Brutahl with their full thirty thousand, how different things might have been.

“Then again, it was to prevent exactly that scenario that the Warmaiden offered herself as bait...”

As loath as Scáthach was to admit it, the enemy had been at least one move ahead of her, possibly two. How much they had truly foreseen, she didn’t know, but there was no denying that their strategy had been magnificent. She would have applauded them if she could have.

“Still,” Rache ventured, “we would have taken the fort by now if the Draali forces had not withdrawn.”

“There is no use in lamenting their loss. They have their own homeland to defend. We could hardly demand that they stay.”

Four days prior, a request for aid had arrived from Draal: *The scion of Mars has crossed the border and is carving a path toward the capital. Return with all haste.* Puppchen had hesitated to comply—one could hardly blame him for feeling uneasy at the prospect of a battle with the One-Eyed Dragon—but ultimately decided that he could not afford to let his homeland fall. The Resistance, robbed of their shield, had assembled a task force to harry Third Prince Brutahl’s advance, but it remained to be seen how much time it could buy.

“Whatever the case, we must take the fort by tomorrow. The day after at the very latest.”

If they did not claim a victory as quickly as possible, they would find themselves broken against the very fort they were trying to capture. Their vengeance would go unrealized, and brave soldiers of Faerzen would die needlessly.

That, Scáthach had to avoid at all costs. She looked down at the azure spear in her hand. If she were to use its power now, might that be enough?

“Do not think it, Your Highness.” Rache interrupted her thoughts. “If you were to pass out as you did before, we would be robbed of our commander, and that would only lend our foes more time. Have you forgotten that you rendered

yourself comatose for an entire day?”

“If I were to use my power now, I could break the fort. We would have time to prepare for the battle with Third Prince Brutahl.”

“You may well put yourself to sleep for two days, perhaps three. Where would that leave our preparations? I tell you, Your Highness, do not think it.”

“What other choice do we have? If attacking with all our might is not enough, we can but retreat—” Scáthach stopped as a plan flashed across her mind. It would work, perhaps...but it would disgrace the royal line of Faerzen.

“Your Highness? Is something the matter?”

There was concern in Rache’s voice at her sudden silence, but for a while she did not respond. After a long time brooding, she looked up at last with resolve in her eyes.

“I will do it. There is no other choice.”

“Your Highness, I cannot countenance your use of this power.”

“That is not what I mean. Order the men to fall back. Our battle is done for today.”

Rache’s eyebrows furrowed. “Your Highness, this is...a very sudden decision.”

“There is one way that we might still break our foes’ spirits,” Scáthach explained. “One way we might sap their will to fight. But I am reluctant to resort to it.”

“And what is that?”

“I will tell you later. First, you must command the men to fall back. Let them rest. Permit them a small amount of drink. Tomorrow they must fight even harder than they have today.”

“Understood, Your Highness. But when the time comes, I will insist upon that explanation.” Rache left to give the order, glancing back over his shoulder several times as though to reinforce his point.

Scáthach bowed her head silently. “Forgive me, Rache. I do only what is necessary for victory.”

She drew her horse closer by the reins, swung onto its back, and rode away. Her destination lay in the heart of the Faerzen Resistance's camp, in the tent next to her own. After coming close enough to dismount again, she made to stalk wordlessly inside, but one of the sentries called out to her.

"Is something the matter, Your Highness?"

Normally, they would let her pass with nothing more than a bow, but the unease on her face seemed to have given something away. She found herself looking down guiltily.

"I have come to see the prisoner. I trust nothing is amiss?"

"Not at all, Your Highness!"

"Good. Now, if I may..."

Scáthach passed through the entrance of the heavily guarded tent. A few more wordless steps and she arrived at her destination: a curious room with a large cage in the center.

She drew closer. "How are you feeling?" she asked the crimson-haired girl resting behind the bars.

"Much better. Thanks to you." The sight of the girl's bandage-swathed limbs always evinced a wince, but proper medical treatment seemed to have returned the color to her face. "Can I help you?"

Her unreserved smile was almost dazzling to look at. None could deny that she had inherited the beauty of the von Grantz line—for indeed she was Sixth Princess Celia Estrella, rescued from the now-retreated Puppchen's clutches. The man had not given up his prize easily, but the threat of Scáthach's strength had left him little choice.

"Is something wrong?" Liz pressed. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Know that I take no pleasure in what I am about to do," Scáthach said. "Although no amount of regret could ever excuse it."

Liz tilted her head in confusion. "What?"

Scáthach bowed her head in a desperate apology. "Forgive me."

She could not bring herself to explain that she had come to take the girl's life. The words simply would not hatch from her lips, as though they had erased themselves from her mind.

"Oh. Right." Something seemed to tip Liz off as to what was happening, but to Scáthach's surprise, she smiled rather than ask anything further. "Well, thank you for rescuing me, anyway."

Her resignation could not have been genuine. Surely she still retained attachments to this world; surely she still had goals left to accomplish. Her calmness had to be a facade; beneath it, the fear of death must have swelled within her breast. And yet—and yet—she met Scáthach's eyes with a valiant smile and nothing more.

"From the moment I set out on this road, I knew it might end like this. So...just do it. Don't hold back."

That was a lie. It could not possibly have been true. If she would utter just one word of resentment, it would have made Scáthach's task so much easier...so why was she voicing thanks instead?

"Oh! Right! Sorry." Liz waved her hands in front of her face in an endearing show of sheepishness. "It can't make it any easier to have me staring at you."

She flashed one final smile, closed her eyes, and let the expression drain from her face. Perhaps in an attempt to maintain her pride as a princess of the empire, she refused to flinch until her last breath.

In that brief glimpse of Liz's heart, Scáthach only saw her own cravenness written more starkly, and she had to look away. "Gáe Bolg," she intoned. "Grant her eternal rest."

A fierce chill sprang up as she raised her azure spear. Whiteness blossomed inside the tent as the freezing cold swirled through. Ice began to creep and crack over the bars of Liz's cage. Lævateinn's blessing tried to force it back as it reached her feet, but the fire was too weak, too concerned for its master; it could not burn hot enough to contest the Boreal Sovereign's power. In moments, the flame had guttered out, leaving Liz encased in ice.

"Your Highness!" A voice rang from the tent entrance; Scáthach did not have

to turn around to recognize it as Rache. “Surely you have not lost your wits?!”

“I have not.”

“And this is no act of vengeance for the battle turning against us?”

“It is not.”

“Then tell me, why have you done this?”

She could sense the anger in Rache’s voice and dared not turn to face him. What grounds did she have to criticize Puppchen now? It was her, not him, who had taken this girl’s life in the end.

“I mean to display her frozen body in front of Fort Mitte and break the imperial soldiers’ spirits.”

Rache nodded. “Of course. Perhaps they will forget themselves and attempt to steal her back.”

“Even if they don’t go to such lengths, the sight will breed anger and sorrow. They will grow wilder and more reckless, and the scales of battle will tip in our favor.”

Scáthach approached a weapon rack in the corner, still unable to look Rache in the eye. She picked up a sword and, with a short run-up, drove it deep into the block of ice.

“What are you doing, Your Highness?! Is it not beneath you to desecrate the dead?!”

Ignoring Rache’s pleas, she picked up more swords and spears and thrust them one after another into the ice. All of the blades stopped inches before touching Liz.

“I will not stoop so low as to defile her corpse. But to see their princess in this state will shock the enemy all the same. They will imagine for themselves the treatment that she has endured, and it will fill them with rage.”

Scáthach knew only too well how such thoughts came unbidden to mind. Seeing the corpses of her own family had done much the same to her.

“I will deserve whatever mud they sling at me. I know full well that this is a

coward's act."

But even should her road be paved with corpses, she would not stop until she had her vengeance. And though it should lead her into the bowels of hell, she would plunge into the inferno with Gáe Bolg in hand.

"My homeland is ravaged, my people slaughtered, my soldiers shamed, my family butchered."

Her pride was a small price to pay next to what she had already lost.

"If staining my honor will wash theirs clean, I will do so gladly."

At last, she drove Gáe Bolg into the earth and bowed her head against the pillar of ice.

"I will beg no forgiveness. I will quail not at death. My fear shall burn to ashes in the flames of vengeance."

Sobs began to wrack her throat, and she fell to her knees as though offering a prayer.

"For that is all I have left of my family."

Defeat would mean losing everything. Victory would bring lasting relief. The two were one—two sides of the same coin, distinguished only by how it fell.

* * * * *

The twentieth day of the eleventh month of Imperial Year 1023

The Draali force that had been occupying Faerzen was coming up on Fort Terminus. They had arrived after just two days' forced march: an almost miraculous feat driven by fear of losing their homeland. The price had been steep, however. Their formation was in disarray, their tanks haphazard, and their forces scattered; of the original twenty thousand men, all but five thousand had fallen by the wayside. Puppchen's carriage trundled in the lead.

"Perhaps you ought to allow your men to rest?" ventured the guest within.

Puppchen, who was reclining on the sofa, grimaced in distaste as he glared at his associate. "That is not your concern. Besides, the enemy has only five thousand. We are more than their match."

“If your nobles have done their jobs, there will be even fewer to contend with.”

“Then surely there is nothing to fear.” Puppchen plucked an apple from the wicker hamper at his feet and took a large bite before holding out another.

“Want one?”

His companion turned down the offer with a shake of his head.

“Come to think of it,” Puppchen continued, “it strikes me as ill-advised for you to be in my company at all.”

“I will take my leave soon enough. To venture any closer to *him* would be an unnecessary risk.”

Puppchen snorted and threw his half-eaten apple away. “Ah, yes, of course. What was it you called yourself? The Eyes of Orcus?”

“I believe you misspeak. Did you perhaps mean Vang?”

“Yes, yes, that. Quite the selection of allies you have.” Puppchen pulled out a bottle of wine, which he brought straight to his lips. “Drink truly does taste better this way,” he chuckled as he took a swig.

“Well, I do believe that is all I can stomach of this conversation. Allow me to take my leave.”

The man from Vang opened the door and silently exited the carriage. A chorus of surprised voices went up from the guards outside. He doubtless stood out like a sore thumb in the early morning light. A fine spy he made, Puppchen thought with a snort.

“Imperial dogs! Forget about me, will they? Well, we’ll just see about that!”

In a rush of anger, he dashed his wine bottle against the floor. Glass shards sprayed in all directions, one grazing his arm deep enough to leave a shallow gash. For a moment he sat, shoulders heaving, and then there came a commotion from outside the carriage.

“Lord Puppchen,” a harried voice reported. “We have sighted the imperial soldiers surrounding Fort Terminus.”

“How many?”

“I believe perhaps three thousand.”

“Slow us down as we approach the fort. Let the units that have gotten separated catch back up. In the meantime, I’ll assemble an advance force to put these imperials in their place.”

“Understood, my lord. I will relay as much to the officers.”

The morning chill sank its claws into Puppchen fiercely enough to dispel his sleepiness. Grumbling, he buried himself back beneath his blanket.

“Curse that Handhaven. Can the fool not even handle three thousand?” When the man had sent for reinforcements, Puppchen had assumed he was beset by a much larger force. “The ‘scion of Mars’? Bah. He ought to be embarrassed to be intimidated by titles.”

If he had known what he was actually up against, he would have taken only five thousand men and left the rest in Faerzen. By now, he would have had the sixth princess in his clutches.

“My greatest regret about this accursed conflict,” he muttered. “I never should have let her go. If it weren’t for that wench’s meddling...”

Scáthach’s precious chivalry had been a constant thorn in his side. Had he had his wits about him, he would have turned on the Faerzen Resistance and stolen the sixth princess back rather than meekly retreating. It was too late now, but perhaps once the business at hand was concluded, he could return and do what he should have done then...

The sound of somebody outside the window interrupted his pondering. “What?” he called.

“The imperial army is retreating from Fort Terminus, my lord,” came a voice from outside.

“What? Has the advance force done its work already?”

“No, my lord,” the messenger said hesitantly. “The enemy fell back before swords were drawn.”

Puppchen opened the window in confusion. Sure enough, in the distance, a black shadow was moving in the opposite direction to the fort, trailing a column

of dust as it went. So that was the Crow Legion that had everybody whispering? He had heard that they were fierce as demons and twice as bloodthirsty.

“Yet they turn tail and run without even drawing steel? Pathetic.”

If this was all they had to offer, they were a disappointment. It was enough to make a man wonder why he had rushed home at all. And where was this scion of the War God? Was he not supposed to have never known defeat?

“I suppose such tales have a way of growing taller with the telling. A shame.” Puppchen shut the window and sprawled back in his seat. “Ride on to Fort Terminus. I have some choice words for that useless oaf who calls himself my brother.”

“Understood, my lord.” The messenger departed.

At last, the fort came into view. A military encampment seemed to have sprung up around it. Cooking pots lay scattered on the ground, their fires still burning. The Crow Legion had left in a hurry, evidently in the middle of dinner.

“A sight to remind me how powerful I’ve grown,” Puppchen murmured.

The sun was climbing high as he arrived at the gates of Fort Terminus. A gentle breeze blew across the plain, making the grass seem studded with jewels as the morning dew caught the light. The Draali army came to a stop and a short while passed. Eventually, Puppchen noticed that something was wrong.

“What are those accursed gatemen playing at?”

A soldier came to the door, evidently just as confused. “We don’t know, my lord. We’ve hailed them several times, but they won’t respond.”

“What in the world is my fool brother doing?!”

Puppchen stormed out of the carriage, intent on confronting Handhaven in person. His aides rushed after him, although not before dismounting—they knew only too well that accompanying him on horseback while he was on foot would provoke his ire. Earning the wrath of the future grand duke was a guaranteed way to worsen a man’s standing, if not outright cost him his lands.

“Handhaven!” Puppchen called. “Open the gates, you hapless buffoon! See how your brother has ridden to your rescue!”

He stomped his foot in irritation as he glared up at his brother's flags on the ramparts. If there were sentries on the walls, surely somebody was available to answer him.

"Do you not know who I am?! Open this gate or I'll have all your heads!"

The aides blanched as they sensed their lord's anger swelling. They hastily joined him in entreating the fort's occupants to open the gate.

At last, a man appeared on the watchtower on the ramparts. "Welcome back, Lord Puppchen," he drawled. With his head bowed low and his head covered by a hood, it was impossible to make out his face. His voice was that of a young man, but anything more was too hard to discern.

"And who are you?" Puppchen demanded.

"Merely a humble servant of Lord Handhaven."

"Is that so? And what is that oaf playing at? Why does he not come forth himself?"

"I fear that illness has left him confined to his bed."

"What? He mentioned nothing of the sort when he wrote to me the other day."

"His ailment only came on yesterday, my lord. It is understandable that you might not know."

"Bah, very well. Open these gates, then. I would visit my brother."

Puppchen seemed to intend that command to conclude the conversation, but the hooded man made no move to obey.

"What of the sixth princess, my lord?" he asked.

"That is nothing I am prepared to discuss with a lowly servant. Now cease this nonsense and open this blasted gate!"

"Let's try that again. What have you done with the sixth princess?"

Who did this upstart think he was? Puppchen's entourage began to mutter amongst themselves. Puppchen himself said nothing—he had no obligation to tell some common soldier anything about his captive—although he did roll his

shoulders with irritation.

“Am I to take it that you don’t mean to answer?” the hooded man asked.

Puppchen’s anger finally erupted. “You wretched ingrate!” he roared, his face twisting into a scowl. “Who do you take me for?!”

The aides around him stepped back in fear of his wrath.

“Open this gate so I can cut your head from your shoulders myself!”

At that moment, a clamor erupted behind the Draali forces. Puppchen’s aides spun around to see what was wrong, but he himself stayed glaring at the man on the watchtower. Spitting vows of vengeance, he drew his sword from his sheath.

“You there!”

“Yes?” the hooded figure replied.

“Not you!” With murder in his eyes, Puppchen glared in turn at the soldiers around the man. His lips twisted into a sadistic grin. “Bring me his head and you may name your reward!”

Curiously, nobody moved a muscle. Jeers drifted back on the wind.

“You really ought to look behind you, Lord Puppchen,” the hooded man said. “You’re in quite the predicament.”

“What?”

Puppchen swung around and gasped. Behind him sprawled an impossible scene. A sandstorm had sprung up behind the Draali forces despite the wind being all but still. Roars and battle cries reached his ears before quickly being replaced by screams.

One of his aides rode up in a panic. “Enemies to our rear, my lord! The battle is already underway!”

“How many?!”

“We cannot tell! They are hidden by the sandstorm!”

“Who are they?!”

“We don’t—”

A gentle sound passed through the air, a soft *snick* like a knife cutting into fruit. Puppchen watched in horror as the man toppled from his saddle, his eyes rolling back into his skull. A single arrow protruded from his forehead.

“This is no time to be getting distracted, Lord Puppchen.”

The hooded man’s voice guided Puppchen’s eyes back up to the ramparts, where a new flag was now flying.

“What...? But how...?” Puppchen raised a trembling finger to point at the sigil.

Every man in Aletia knew that banner. In one nation, it commanded tremendous fame, while among the rest, it was spoken of with dread—a black dragon clutching a silver sword.

“It cannot be... The War God’s sacred standard?!”

As Puppchen stared, aghast, the rest of Handhaven’s flags came down and black dragon banners rose in their place. A multitude of archers appeared on the battlements, all of their arrows trained on him.

“No! Stop!” he cried. “You would not dare!”

The wind hummed. Countless shafts swished through the air. Dying screams rose from Puppchen’s aides. His guards saw the peril and rushed in front of him with shields raised, but a cloud of shafts fanned out from the fort’s walls, picking them off to the last man.

What followed was hell. A merciless rain of arrows slaughtered aides and soldiers alike. Puppchen could do nothing but watch, frozen in place by the sudden slaughter.

“Now, Lord Puppchen, I believe you asked me to open the gates?”

His request was granted at last, but it brought him no hope. Out from the gate poured heavily armored cavalry. What few aides had survived the barrage of arrows were trampled to death beneath their hooves.

“You are welcome to enter. If you can, that is.”

Those who fled were struck down from behind with spears. Those who

begged for their lives were put to the sword. It went without saying that none of the Draali soldiers could muster any resistance, but they had no hope of escape either—they could only die shrieking.

Puppchen, his good cheer long vanished, turned to flee on trembling legs. All the while, his aides died around him.

“And where do you think you’re going?”

“You...!”

A hooded figure appeared in front of him—the man from the watchtower who had claimed to serve Handhaven.

“Where is the sixth princess, Lord Puppchen?”

“Who are you?”

Puppchen already knew the answer, he just didn’t want to believe it. He could already picture the face beneath the hood. The rumors had been on the lips of every noble in every banquet hall in the land. They whispered in awe when they uttered his name, and their voices trembled in fear when they spoke of Hiro Schwartz von Grantz.

The man cast off his hood, exposing his face to the sun. A sudden gust snatched the scrap of cloth away to the farthest skies.

“It’s you! The One-Eyed Dragon!”

The boy’s features were too gentle for a battlefield, but that only heightened Puppchen’s terror.

“Everybody reacts like that. Maybe someday, somebody will actually surprise me.” Hiro smiled. “Now. Would you care to tell me what you’ve done with the sixth princess?”

“And what will happen if I do?”

“That will depend on your answer.”

Jet-black cavalry gathered behind Hiro, joining him in blocking Puppchen’s path. Hiro craned his neck, looking around the battlefield, before returning his gaze to Puppchen.

“It’ll be over soon,” he said.

There was no need to ask what he meant. The commander of the Draali force was indisposed and his aides had fallen beneath the rain of arrows. With the chain of command severed, Puppchen’s twenty thousand men were no better than a mob. Unable to muster an effective resistance, they were being slaughtered by the enemy’s black-clad soldiers.

“Your men must be exhausted after running all the way from Faerzen. It’s no surprise that they can’t fight back. After all,” —Hiro’s voice dropped a notch— “a commander as arrogant as you probably didn’t even let them stop to rest.”

That, Puppchen could not deny. There had been no room for breaks on his forced march.

“Now, let me ask you again. Where is the sixth princess?”

At this point, being stubborn in maintaining his silence would only be inviting torture. Divulging what he knew would at least earn him the slightly cushier treatment afforded a prisoner of war. He put on his most diplomatic smile. “She is with the Faerzen Resistance.”

“I see. Why don’t you tell me more?”

Puppchen nodded meekly. “Of course. I— Ngh!”

A blunt impact struck the back of his head. Darkness claimed him before he even felt pain.

* * * * *

Hiro stared down at the unconscious Puppchen for a moment, then rolled him over with his foot. He plucked the man’s sword from his belt and sat down on his back.

“Now, let’s wake you up.”

He reversed the sword in his grip and drove it down hard through the back of Puppchen’s hand. The blade bit deep into the earth.

“Aaagh! Wh-What are you—? Eaaah!”

As the pain dragged Puppchen back to consciousness, Hiro seized a fistful of

his hair and smashed his face against the ground. Blood spurted from his nose.

“You’re going to tell me *everything* you know about the sixth princess. And if you lie to me, I’ll hurt you worse.”

“I’b be hobest! Just dob’t hurt me!”

“And keep it short. We don’t have much time.”

“It’s true that I captured the sixth princess, but I made certain to treat her well. I’d never harm a member of the Grantzian royal family!”

“Really? That’s strange. I was told that when Third Prince Brutahl asked to see her, you refused.”

“How could I let him?! What if he’d stolen her back?! We were trying to negotiate. I needed her for leverage.”

“So where is she now?”

“Those accursed dogs in the Faerzen Resistance took her. They’re not human, I tell you. A host of demons. There’s no telling what they would do to her. I tried to stop them, but they used some manner of sorcery to thwart me.”

“Sorcery?”

“One among them...she wields a strange spear with power over ice. It can control the weather too. I’ve seen it conjure a rain of spears out of a clear sky.”

“Oh? Interesting.” Hiro couldn’t guess who this woman was, but only one spear in his memory was capable of manipulating the weather.

Taking account of this “power over ice,” there’s no doubt about it—it has to be Gáe Bolg.

One of the Archfiend’s Fellblades—the Fiend of Cerulean—matched that description too, but that took the form of a set of twin swords, not a spear. Gáe Bolg was the only possibility. He hadn’t expected to encounter it outside of the empire, but spirits were guardians of all of humanity, not just one nation—such a thing wasn’t unthinkable.

The Spirit King happens to favor the empire in particular, but there’s no reason the Spiritblades can’t choose others.

“There’s more. She’s one of the royal line of Faerzen. A survivor.”

“Is she now? It sounds like this spear has found its way into inconvenient hands.”

The Boreal Sovereign had always been fickle, but only the most eccentric of the Spiritblades would have chosen somebody so opposed to the empire.

“She despises the name of von Grantz,” Puppchen warned him. “If you don’t want your princess to come to harm, you’d better be quick. She’s not as gracious as I am.”

“What shape was Liz in when you handed her over to the Resistance?”

“I catered to her needs as best I could, but she took exception to life as a prisoner. She was accustomed to certain luxuries, you see. She was...demanding, shall we say. Rather abusive when her requests weren’t met.”

“I see.”

With a nod, Hiro withdrew the sword from Puppchen’s palm. The man groaned in pain, but there was relief in his eyes.

Hiro glared down at him coldly and drove the blade through his other hand.

“Aaaaaagh!”

“I know you’re lying.”

“On what grounds?! I told you no lies!”

“Liz? Accustomed to luxury? You don’t know half of what she’s been through.” Hiro’s voice was contemptuous as he gave the blade a vicious twist.

“Yes, people flocked to her after she was chosen by Lævateinn, but only to abandon her at the first opportunity. In the end, she was left with two men and a wolf as her only allies.”

Lævateinn’s favor had thrown her life into disarray. If not for that, she would never have been forced to take up a sword, never have gone to war, never have been taken prisoner. She would have lived a happy life as a princess of the empire.

“Do you think she isn’t trying just because she doesn’t show it?”

Even in the face of doubt and pain, she had never averted her eyes from her own shortcomings, never tried to shirk her solitary burden. She had always faced forward without complaint and gotten to work with a smile.

“Don’t you dare slander her name.” Hiro withdrew the sword from Puppchen’s hand and pressed the point against the back of the man’s head. “Now, what did you do to her? No lies this time or you won’t have a head left to cut off.”

“N-Now, let’s not be hasty!” Puppchen stammered.

“You’d better hurry. Your brother is on his way right now, and I don’t have the numbers to fight him. If you tell me the truth, I’ll be willing to spare your life. You’ll be taken prisoner and traded back to Lord Handhaven once we’ve come to an agreement.”

“Truly?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t lie. I hope you’ll show me the same courtesy.” Hiro patted Puppchen’s shoulder with a reassuring smile.

His resistance worn down, Puppchen sighed and began to speak. “I wanted to examine her Spiritblade’s protection. To test the limits of what it would repel. I began by throwing smaller rocks, then moved on to bigger ones. Once her protection had grown weak enough, I pulled out her nails—”

Hiro grimaced. “That’s enough.”

“But I never laid a finger on her myself! That’s the truth, I swear it!”

“I don’t need to hear any more.”

“No!”

Hiro swung the sword down. It plunged into the ground beside Puppchen’s head, leaving the slightest cut on his cheek.

“E-Eek!” the man squealed.

“In view of your honesty, I will spare your life.” Hiro stood up, releasing his hold on Puppchen’s back.

“Thank you, my lord! You are gracious indeed!” Puppchen wrapped his arms

around Hiro's leg, his face smeared with tears and snot.

"Keep your worthless thanks. You are now my prisoner. Do you understand?"

Puppchen nodded furiously. Hiro gestured for soldiers to come and tie him up. Among them was Huginn, who glared at him with undisguised loathing.

"Turns my stomach to watch a worm like you get to keep crawling," she spat.

The corners of Puppchen's mouth pulled into a grin. "Do go a little softer on the bindings, would you? And my wounds will need to be seen to. We wouldn't want them to get infected."

Hiro, watching the interaction in silence, gestured for Muninn to bring his swift Drake.

"Right away, chief." The man vanished into the mass of soldiers.

Garda arrived in his place. "Most of the Draali forces have fled. I assume you do not intend to pursue?"

"No. Now that I know where Liz is, I'm heading straight to Faerzen."

"And you mean to let this cur live?" The zlosta gestured toward Puppchen, to whom the medics were attending.

"I do keep my word."

"Do you now." Garda peered at Hiro searchingly for a moment, but whatever he saw seemed to satisfy him and he said nothing more on the subject. "I presume we'll otherwise stick to the plan?"

"That's right. Have the wounded sent back to High General Vakish."

"Understood. I'll notify the officers."

With that, Garda departed. As the large man receded into the distance, Hiro approached the now-bound Puppchen.

"We're heading into Faerzen now. You'll be coming with us."

"What? Then you'd best send word to my brother. He will ready a ransom—"

Puppchen got no further. Hiro shushed him with a hand. "There's no time. We're in for a forced march as it is."

“Got the beast, chief!” Muninn announced, returning with swift Drake in tow. The creature spotted Hiro and rubbed its head affectionately against his chest.

“Unfortunately, Lord Puppchen, we don’t seem to have any horses to spare.”

“Then surely that is all the more reason to trade me—” Puppchen fell abruptly silent. He had caught a glimpse of Hiro’s face as he stroked his swift Drake.

“Of course. Once we return from Faerzen.”

With a genial smile, Hiro picked up a length of rope lying on the ground. One end was attached to Puppchen’s bindings; the other he looped around his swift Drake’s neck.

“Try not to trip.”

“Eh?”

Hiro strode up to a frozen Puppchen and patted him twice on the shoulder. “Survive the journey and you’re a free man.”

Seeing the bottomless cruelty in Hiro’s eyes, Puppchen paled in despair.

Chapter 5: Heavenly Sovereign, Boreal Sovereign

The twenty-second day of the eleventh month, Imperial Year 1023

Within the beleaguered Fort Mitte, Aura faced a grim decision.

“This fort could fall by sunset.”

Her blunt declaration cut through the tension hanging over the tower above the gate. Bitter sighs issued from the assembled aides. None protested, however. Had it not been for her, they would never have lasted so long.

“Then what’s to be done, my lady?” one of the men asked. “Soldiers of the empire do not sit and wait for death.”

An older advisor scowled. “Are you proposing we sally forth and die with honor?”

The soldiers had fought bravely for many long days, but they were reaching their breaking point. No man remained unwounded, provisions were running out with no hope of resupply, and no rescue was coming. Once the troops’ strength dwindled, the siege would become untenable. Even so, a final doomed charge was unlikely to appreciably bloody the enemy’s nose.

“What other choice do we have? I for one mean to put up a fight that my ancestors will be proud of in the next world.”

“Even if it means dying for nothing?”

“It will not be for nothing. We will all earn our place with the Divines.”

“You’re too quick to give up hope. Third Prince Brutahl will come for us—you’ll see.”

The aides were split into two camps: those who wanted to cling to hope and continue the siege, and those who wanted to die with honor and preserve their military dignity. It fell to Aura to choose which path to take.

“I’m going outside,” she said. “I need to think.”

She found a place on the ramparts and gazed down at the battlefield, agonizing over what to do. The Faerzen Resistance's encampment was a distant smear on the plain. Her eyes swept down a little, stopping on a point one sel from the main gate. There stood a girl encased in ice—a girl Aura knew well.

“Forgive me.”

She clenched her fist, furious at her own inefficacy. There was no telling what sequence of events had produced that sight, but two days prior, the Resistance had warned the entire fort that the same fate awaited them if they did not surrender.

“Something is happening... I just don't know what.”

The Resistance was in a hurry, that much was plain, but there was no way to find out why. Their blockade was tight enough that a rat would have trouble getting past, let alone a spy. Fort Mitte was completely cut off from the outside world.

“The least I can do is help her.”

Aura cast another glance at Liz. There was no telling whether the princess was alive or dead, but no servant of the Grantzian royal family could fail to feel rage to see her frozen state.

“He'll hate me for this.”

Aura's failings had brought about Liz's fate, and the twinblack boy would never forgive her for it. She bit her lip in chagrin as she recalled how things had reached this tragic point.

“Everything was going to plan at first.”

In order to draw the forces of the Faerzen Resistance out of hiding, she had pretended to overextend herself and fled to Fort Mitte. Once the siege was laid, more and more Resistance forces began to show themselves, smelling blood in the water. When their numbers swelled to more than thirty thousand, Aura knew that the trap had been a success. All that remained had been to coordinate with Liz, whom the emperor had newly assigned to Faerzen, to crush the enemy between them and let Third Prince Brutahl mop up what was left.

The Draali forces' arrival had put paid to that. Thanks to their intervention, what should have been Aura's masterstroke had instead led to Liz's capture. Her imagination had failed her, that she could not deny. She had overlooked an important piece of the puzzle, and no amount of regret could undo the consequences.

Her mind was seizing up. She could feel it. The schemes in her head were growing hazy for want of a guiding light. Every possible path seemed doomed, the specter of failure too daunting. She could not afford to choose lightly when so much hinged on her decision. Her next move would quite literally make the difference between life and death.

"I cannot throw their lives away."

Aura cast her gaze over the soldiers sitting dejectedly along the wall. It was only thanks to their faith in her that anyone in Fort Mitte had lasted this long. At first, they had numbered more than five thousand; now, they barely accounted for one. All bore wounds, some were too pain-stricken to sleep, and more than a few were erratic with terror.

As she pondered what to do, a figure caught her eye. The man was bearish in build and taller than most, yet he seemed strangely small looking down from the battlements. His white-flecked beard rippled in the wind as he gazed at Liz's prison of ice.

Aura hurried to the man's side. "Sir Tarmier, what are you doing?"

"Ah, Lady Aura. I was simply looking at Her Highness."

She had traded few words with Tris von Tarmier, but she recalled him being far more full of life when they had met at Berg Fortress. Now, he was like a corpse without a grave.

"Go back to the infirmary. You're too hurt to be on your feet."

"No, lass. I'd rather be here...where I can see the princess I failed to save."

After seeing his unit to safety, Tris had plunged back into the fray, mounting a one-man assault on the Draali forces in a desperate bid to retrieve Liz. No doubt the old soldier had been looking for a place to die—and indeed, only one thing had kept him from finding it.

“How is Cerberus?” Aura asked.

Tris clenched a fist and ground his teeth in chagrin. “Lady Cerberus is yet to wake.”

It was thanks to the white wolf that he had turned his back on death that day and withdrawn to Fort Mitte. Aura remembered it well. He had come staggering through the gate with the beast in his arms and desperation in his eyes, pleading despite his own grave wounds for them to treat her first. No sooner had the words left his mouth than he too had passed out. Only a few days prior had he regained consciousness.

“I thought you might sortie as soon as you were awake,” Aura said.

“I’ll not leave Lady Cerberus unattended.” Tris rubbed the back of his head and cracked a sheepish smile. “Her Highness would be furious.”

“She cares for Cerberus?”

“Aye. Known her longer than she’s known me.”

“I see.”

“Only seems right for her to be there when the lady wakes.”

Tris raised his head to stare at Liz again. A trickle of blood ran from the corner of his mouth. His eyes blazed, and fury lined itself into his face. He looked ready to fling himself from the walls.

Aura punched him on the hip, hard. “Go back to the infirmary.”

Tris spun around in surprise and peered down at her, his rage dissipating. “That’s no way to treat a wounded man.”

“Cerberus could wake at any moment. Go back to the infirmary.” Aura’s gaze softened as she pointed the way with a flopping sleeve. “Liz will be just as furious if you don’t take care of yourself.”

Tris gave a grunt of dissatisfaction but nodded, mollified by the mention of Liz. “Aye, right enough. I suppose I’ll return to bed, then.”

With one final rueful smile, he disappeared down the stairs to the infirmary. Aura remained atop the walls, gazing distantly out over the enemy camp.

“Sortie. Defeat. Rout. Extermination. Death with honor.”

Even saying the words out loud didn't help. Was it better to die gloriously on the battlefield or to sit here and resign herself to her fate? No matter how hard she searched, no answer presented itself.

“Hm?”

A disturbance in the Resistance's camp caught her eyes. She hauled herself up onto the battlements and squinted into the distance. As she watched, a female knight approached the fort's gate with a leisurely stride.

“Hear me, Treya Verdan Aura von Bunadala of the Grantzian Empire!”

Aura dropped back down to conceal herself behind the battlements and peered between the crenelations. The knight swept her gaze over the fort, beautiful and regal in her posture. This woman, Culann Scáthach du Faerzen, was another of Aura's miscalculations—a member of Faerzen's royal family.

“I offer you one final chance! Surrender and save your men from needless deaths!”

She had been told that the emperor—or, more precisely, First Prince Stovell—had taken the heads of the entire royal line. The last thing she had expected was a survivor.

“If you do not surrender, we will storm the fort! How do you answer?!”

Scáthach planted her azure spear in the ground. Silence fell. Nobody made a sound. A moment passed, and then Scáthach's features twisted in disappointment. Her shoulders slumped, but her voice rang clear and steely as the rays of the setting sun fell upon her.

“Very well! Men of the imperial army, I speak now to you! Deliver me the persons of Lady von Bunadala and Buze von Krone and you will once more tread the soil of your motherland!”

In other words, she would let them go. That, Aura had not expected. She had been certain that the woman intended to kill them all.

“I shall give you time to weigh your decision. Two lives in exchange for all of yours! Think well on what I offer!”

Aura felt her resolve waver. If she only surrendered herself, all of her soldiers would be free to return home. The wounded could receive treatment. Some of the men on death's door might be saved. Buze von Krone, however, was unlikely to look kindly on the offer. They would have to restrain him and drag him out of the cellar where he was hiding.

Aura closed her eyes and steeled her resolve before stepping down from the wall. She returned to the turret over the main gate to find her faithful aides waiting for her, a bandage-swathed von Spitz among them. Every face was grave. They seemed to sense their impending defeat.

"I intend to surrender," she announced.

The aides' faces darkened with anger. "You would have us give up our commander to save our own skins?!" cried one. "Surely you jest, my lady!"

"You must reconsider," said an older man with a disapproving shake of his head. "Surely you can imagine how you will be received."

After how the imperial army had ravaged Faerzen, there was no question that Aura would be subjected to similar humiliation. What they had done to Liz erased any doubt. She could not expect to be treated kindly.

Von Spitz stepped forward with a warmhearted smile. "My lady, I would charge the enemy alone and go gladly to the Divines before I would ever send you into their clutches."

"Although I'd not object to handing over Buzen von Krone," somebody remarked.

"Nor would I, after what he's done," another man agreed.

Their scorn was well earned; as administrator, Buze had been a brutal ruler. He had beheaded every noble who had served the royal family, sold their fairest wives and daughters into slavery, and reduced the famously picturesque capital to a shell of its former self. In an attempt to curry favor, he had extended *carte blanche* to nobles of the empire to do with the city as they pleased. By the time Aura had arrived in Faerzen by imperial decree, it had been reduced to a smoking ruin. The sorry sight had earned the dubious honor of rousing even Third Prince Brutahl's anger.

“The enemy has given us time, my lady.” Von Spitz approached the central table. “I say we use it to plot their defeat.”

For lack of any better options, the rest of the aides pitched in and began laying out pawns on the map. They were out of reserves and almost running out of food. The soldiers’ strength and morale were both at rock bottom.

“First time I’ve ever fought long enough to truly run dry. Damned impressive, if you ask me.”

The older aide’s quip prompted nods of agreement. Something warm stirred in Aura’s chest as she watched them get to work. Even when her spirits were broken and she had been ready to surrender, they still believed in her.

“A sortie, then?”

“A feint, I say. We pretend to charge and steal back Her Highness.”

“Care to join us, Lady Aura? We could use your judgment.”

Even now, they were still striving to play their parts as her subordinates. It was only right that she showed the same resolve. Their faith gave her the strength to keep fighting, to keep hoping.

“There’s no need for any glorious deaths.” She strode briskly up to the table and placed a pawn on the map. “This should be their battle to lose, but they aren’t acting like it. Something has them in a hurry.”

Something was afoot. Therein lay their chance. They just had to survive the day, and the next, and the one after that. They would fight to live, no matter the shame that would incur. So long as they still drew breath, there was hope.

Aura thrust out a small fist. “We will survive. And we will win.”

Nobody disagreed with her declaration. They only nodded firmly, as though there was no doubt in their hearts that it was so.

“But first, we have to make it through today.”

She could feel her mind clearing. The fog was dissipating. Fear clouded her mind no more. Though her face remained as expressionless as ever, she issued commands to her aides with a newfound vivacity. The soldiers readily sprang into action, scattering in all directions. They would take personal control of each

of the fort's four walls. Some of them, she would likely never meet again, but the surety of their steps as they sped from the tower seemed to insist that such worries were groundless.

Once Aura finished issuing orders, she set out for the central courtyard with von Spitz.

"Are you certain about this, my lady?"

"I am. I will command the reserves myself."

The sun had set by the time they stepped outside, but as Aura shivered in the growing chill, a shaft of moonlight slipped through the clouds to bathe her in warm light.

The reserves stationed in the courtyard eyed her uncertainly as she arrived. They were swathed in bandages and covered in blood. She went around, thanking every one of them in person for fighting so bravely. It did not take long. They numbered fewer than a hundred.

As she concluded, a new arrival appeared. "I fear these old bones may only cause you trouble, my lady," he announced, "but I'll not sit out this battle."

It was Tris. Though still wounded, the old soldier was positively brimming with vigor. Aura thought to ask what had happened, but he preempted her question.

"Lady Cerberus has awoken," he explained. His face shone with relief for a moment before quickly turning serious. "So it seems I have one more reason not to allow this fort to fall."

Aura's head dipped in a small nod. "Thank you."

Von Spitz gripped Tris's hand, grinning. "I would rather have you at my side than a hundred lesser men."

In a bid to keep spirits up, the soldiers linked arms and sang songs. Over time, however, their voices grew quieter and a nervousness overtook them. The joyous banter faded to silence, and it seemed as though a crushing weight had settled over the courtyard.

At last, there came the sound of enemy footsteps and battle cries from outside the walls. Boots crunched against the earth in numbers a dozen times

what they could muster.

“Your time has run out! We will now storm the fort! Expect no quarter!”

Scáthach’s voice rose above the din. It carried well and rang true in the ears, the mark of a natural commander. Aura steeled her resolve and drew the spirit weapon at her belt.

At that moment, an almighty crash rocked the front gate. Despite the imminent battle, von Spitz’s gaze flicked upward. “What’s the north wall playing at?!”

Archers ought to have been raining arrows down on the enemy, but their numbers must have been too few. The Resistance had already pushed up to the front gate and were working to crack it open.

“Down,” Aura commanded.

She raised her shield above her head. Von Spitz hurriedly followed suit. A moment later, a clatter filled the courtyard like a rain of falling rocks.

“They’re focusing everything on the north wall.”

Seeing the enemy’s strategy, Aura turned to the reserves and ordered them to lend their assistance.

“And the gate won’t hold.”

It was swaying on its hinges now. The enemy must have built some kind of siege weaponry. Another discordant crash sent dust spiraling into the air. Aura set off toward the gate, meaning to lend her assistance, but she only made it a few steps before abruptly being knocked sprawling.

“Ngh... Huh? What...?”

She lifted her head from where it had smacked into the dirt. An unfamiliar man stood over her, dressed as one of her subordinates.

“Apologies, my lady, but I’m afraid I can’t let you live.”

“Run, Lady Aura!” cried von Spitz, seeing the danger, but he was too late. The distance between them yawned far too wide for him to reach.

Aura glared up at the assassin as he raised his sword, to no avail, but as the

wicked blade glinted in the moonlight, a bearish silhouette slipped in front of her: Tris.

“Ah...”

A stunned gasp slipped from her lips as blood sprayed across Tris’s shoulders. For an instant, the stars were red. Despair filled the courtyard. The onlookers stared at Tris with wide eyes.

“How...?”

With a gurgle and a heavy thud, a body toppled to the ground. It was not Tris who fell, however, but Aura’s would-be killer.

“Seems I came in the nick of time,” said a voice from behind the corpse.

“Huh? I know you...” Tris turned, his eyes widening in surprise. Warm moonlight illuminated the intruder: a brawny, olive-skinned man with a scarred face.

“How did you get in here, you knave?!” von Spitz barked.

“Easy, friend. I mean you no harm.” The man threw up his hands in a show of goodwill. “The name’s Muninn, in the gainful employ of our very own One-Eyed Dragon. I’ve got a letter for a certain Lady Aura.”

Despite his fierce appearance, he had a laid-back manner that stuck out like a sore thumb in the tense confines of Fort Mitte.

“Sir Spitz.” Aura gestured for the man to lower his sword, which he reluctantly did. She stepped closer to Muninn and looked up at him. “Who sent you?”

“Why, Lord Hiro, of course.”

The scar-faced man’s blinding grin seemed too wide to be real, and his words too good to be true. Hiro was here. Come to think of it, when was the last time they had exchanged letters? It might well have been before he left for Lebering.

“How many?”

“Fifteen hundred cavalry. The Crow Legion’s finest.”

A shiver ran down Aura’s spine, and she felt her skin grow hot. Never had she imagined that she would hear that name uttered in the modern age. “The

foulest fiend falls when the Crow Legion rides,” she whispered, clutching her book to her chest.

Did they not hesitate to invite the comparison? The Crow Legion’s tale—both good and ill—had become legend, their deeds of one thousand years ago surely exaggerated. It would be no easy task to make the name their own. The idea was Hiro’s, no doubt, but it was bold even for him.

“Call them what you like,” von Spitz interjected, “they’re not the same men who fought under Mars. Fifteen hundred won’t be enough to break the Resistance.”

Neither Aura nor Muninn was listening.

“Here’s that letter. Lord Hiro says you’re to follow every word.”

“I will.”

“He’ll see to the rest. You just sit pretty here ’til the fighting’s done.”

Aura opened the letter and read it by the moon’s glow. A faint smile spread across her stoic face.

Von Spitz’s brow creased dubiously. “Does something amuse you, my lady?”

She shook her head. Her smile had been one of relief, not amusement. In any case, it quickly vanished as her face turned more grave.

“Sir Spitz, tell every unit to gather at the north wall. And light bonfires. Lots of them.”

“I fear I do not understand. Are you certain it is wise to abandon the other walls?”

“Just do it. And hurry.”

Von Spitz stiffened at the cold glare from Aura’s lead-gray eyes. “At once, my lady!” With a deep bow, he departed.

Once he was gone, Aura turned back to Muninn. “Are you staying?”

“Course I am.” He flashed her a smile brimming with confidence. “Lord Hiro’s got it in the bag without my help, just you wait and see.”

* * * * *

Warm moonlight showered the land, but the wind cut like a frozen knife. Atop a small hill, where the gale blew strongest, the silver glow reflected darkly from a force clad in black. The boy who led them—Hiro—stretched out his hand toward the full moon and smiled.

“It’s beautiful, don’t you think? A fine night to catch a foe unawares.”

Beneath him lay Fort Mitte, and around it sprawled the Faerzen Resistance’s troops. The journey from Draal to Faerzen typically took three days, but he had managed it in just one—a feat only possible because of the fresh horses he had instructed High General Vakish to make ready. Fifteen hundred of his three thousand men had kept up with the forced march, an impressive result.

“Huginn has infiltrated the camp,” Garda said. “The men are ready to charge whenever you please.”

At last, all of the pieces were in place to save Liz. “Excellent,” he whispered. “It’s been a long road, but we’re finally here.”

He summoned Excalibur. A silver light gleamed in the darkness, seeming to soothe the soldiers’ exhaustion with its touch. The blade floated down into Hiro’s hand, and he snatched its hilt from the air.

“Now we wait for the signal.” His instructions to Aura had been simple: keep the enemy’s forces split up and their eyes on Fort Mitte. He cast a glance at the structure. “Looks like she’s doing as we asked,” he remarked. “Muninn must have made it inside.”

Bonfires were flaring into life all along the fort’s north wall. At the same time, the enemy launched a vigorous attack on the other three sides, which were now defended only by a skeleton crew. The wind carried the sound of drums from within the fort—no doubt a ploy to keep the enemy’s attention.

“Thank you all for accompanying me on this road.”

Hiro drew Excalibur smoothly from its sheath and turned to face his men. He looked across all of their faces in turn. The moonlight cast their determined expressions into sharp relief as they awaited the command. A genuine smile spread across his face as gratitude welled up from deep within his heart.

“I dedicate this victory to the Spirit King.”

He returned to face the battlefield and raised his glittering blade to the night sky. The soldiers behind him gasped in awe. To see him silhouetted against the moon, none could deny that he was the Hero King of Twinned Black come again. They saw the War God reborn in the modern age, and they knew that victory was promised.

“Come.”

Words would slaughter no foes. The battlefield was no place for ornate proclamations. What he sought, what he asked, what he wished to say, his silhouette told as eloquently as any speech.

He was born to rule the battlefield.

He was a strategist to transcend the world of men.

Thus, Mars needed no words to move men’s hearts, for his presence alone was enough.

“All units, charge.”

Hiro swung Excalibur down and barreled down the slope. The other riders could not match the speed of his swift drake, but that mattered little. The enemy was so fixated on Fort Mitte that they were paying no attention whatsoever to their rear. A small loss of cohesion would make no difference. The raid’s success was certain. With the Resistance sure that victory was at hand, it was all too easy to tear open their flank.

“Hey! Where’s that coming from?!”

A soldier heard the thunder of hoofbeats and spun around, but he was too late.

“We’re under attack—!”

Hiro lopped the man’s head off with one stroke and cut into the enemy lines. The Crow Legion’s cavalry followed like an avalanche, surging into the breach. The night rang with the discordant crunch of warping steel as armor crumpled beneath horseshoes.

The men of the Resistance fell like wheat before a scythe, unable to muster any effective defense. The Crow Legion drove deeper, piercing and implacable

as a pointed needle, slaughtering anybody who crossed their path. Having prepared for a siege rather than open combat, most of the enemy troops were light infantry—nowhere was there a bulwark strong enough to stop a cavalry charge, leaving the Crow Legion to rampage unchecked. They might have fielded archers, but all of those were on the front lines; while they did possess units of spearmen, most of those had been sent to the front as well, their spears finding use as projectiles. Only reserves remained to defend the rear, and sparse thorns had little sting. Besides, many had their guard down, rendering them easily pulverized by the cavalry's momentum.

As the melee grew chaotic and friend mingled with foe, more and more officers succumbed to confusion. They abandoned judgment and charged to their deaths, goaded by panic and outrage. With no superiors to command them, their troops lashed out at whoever was nearby, which in the darkness was often one another. The battlefield steadily turned to a bloodbath, a nexus of hatred of all kinds—roars, screams, battle cries, death rattles.

“Your Lordship!” a voice cried through the din.

Hiro looked around, squinting. Huginn stood in the distance, waving a torch to guide him. At first he thought that she was being reckless—that was guaranteed to draw enemy attention—but by the time he reached her, he had seen that was no concern. Her exceptional archery left every enemy that approached her dead on the ground with an arrow neatly lodged between their eyes.

Hiro dismounted his swiftdrake and stroked its head. “Go back to Garda,” he said before turning to Huginn.

She looked uncomfortable. “Your Lordship.”

“Have you found Liz?”

A shadow fell over Huginn's face as she lowered her eyes. “I... Yes, Your Lordship. I've found her.”

“Well, where is she?”

If she hadn't come with Huginn, that probably meant that she was wounded. There was always the chance that she was hiding somewhere, ready to jump out and fling her arms around him—she did love to surprise him—but the

situation was a little too serious for that.

“She’s there.”

Huginn gestured to a strange object—a pillar of ice. Hiro’s breath caught in his throat at the sight of the figure sealed within.

She had loved that crimson uniform. She had taken great pleasure in adjusting it herself, sometimes quizzing him for days on end if he could tell what she had changed. Now its fabric was cruelly torn, with what looked like bandages showing through beneath. Her limbs were so swathed in cloth that she looked like a mummy. Half-healed grazes crisscrossed her forehead, and abrasions marred her cheeks and lips.

“Ahh...”

He had waited so long for their reunion, but he had never wanted it to be like this.

He slowly approached the icy tomb, stretched out a hand doomed not to reach her. Cold, oh so cold was the wall that barred his way. Sword hilts and spear hafts protruded from the crystal; merely sealing her away had not assuaged the hatred of whoever had done this.



Words failed him. The ice's cool touch betrayed no sign of life. Even Lævateinn did not answer his call. Huginn could only watch as he sank to the ground, gazing up at Liz in horror.

"I'm sorry. I was too late. I'm always too late."

Perhaps if he had thrown all of his plots and schemes to the wind and ridden to her rescue, he could have saved her. But no more.

"Your Lordship, we've got to get her out of..." Huginn trailed off and shrank back. "Your Lordship?"

Around Hiro had begun to swirl baleful darkness—a pitch black storm, wild and bottomless, a sight no sane world could hatch. To look upon him was to know heartbreak.

Excalibur's light guttered in his hand as its radiant gleam gave way to inky darkness.

* * * * *

A short while prior

The front line of the Resistance forces was burning with battle fervor. The soldiers' enraged faces flickered in the wavering light of the enemy bonfires. Before them loomed the walls of Fort Mitte, against which a host of ladders now leaned.

"Orders from command! Second cohort, charge! I repeat, second cohort, charge!"

Horns blared from all around. The sharp notes split the night air as they rose to the starry sky.

"Fight hard, men!" cried the commander of the first cohort in a lusty voice. "The fort will soon fall!"

The second cohort answered with a roar as they ground into motion. The heat emanating from their ranks kept even the cold winds of the Travant Mountains at bay.

"Loose arrows! Give me suppressing fire!"

A cloud of arrows whizzed into the dark, soon becoming nothing more than the eerie whistling of their flights, but screams from the walls showed that they flew true. The cries spurred the second cohort up the ladders. Even so, the enemy was not idle. They stopped at nothing to defend the fort, dropping rocks, kicking down ladders, and pouring boiling water over the attackers.

“They can resist all they like,” Scáthach said under her breath. “It’s only a matter of time before they fall.”

She watched over the battle from the safety of the center of her army. A map lay on the table in front of her. All around, aides barked hurried orders to a fleet of messengers.

“Where is Third Prince Brutahl?”

“He is bound toward us,” Rache replied, “but it seems that the task force succeeded in their diversion. It will be three days at the least before he arrives.” He clenched his fist triumphantly, pleased by the news that they had bought some time.

Scáthach, however, was well aware of the perils of overconfidence. One had to be ready for anything on a battlefield. That was the way of war.

“Good. Reduce our rear defenses and move the men to the front.” She shot a glance at a nearby messenger. The man bowed and dashed away into the dark.

She looked back at Fort Mitte. “They’ve realized that we’re concentrating our forces on the gate.”

Bonfires had been erected along the northern wall, and shadowy figures scurried to and fro beneath them. The enemy had seen that the Resistance was gathering its men and was scrambling to do the same.

“We made no attempt to hide it,” Rache said. “And besides, it matters little. They’re too late. We’re already scaling their walls.”

The nearby aides nodded in agreement. “I took the liberty of having a battering ram constructed,” the one responsible for the engineers piped up. “It has been sent to the front. Regretfully, building siege towers proved impossible. In that I have failed you, Your Highness.” He hung his head apologetically.

Scáthach laid a hand on his shoulder, shaking her head. “There is no failure to speak of. It is a minor miracle that you accomplished what you have.”

“Your Highness, I...”

“And besides, this battle is not yet over. Do not be too quick to assume you will have no other chance.” A crooked grin lingered on her face for a moment, but it quickly vanished. She looked over each of the men in turn. “That goes equally for the rest of you. Remember, we face the Warmaiden. She is certain to be scheming something. We will be the ones ruing this day if we give her half a chance.”

“Yes, Your Highness!” they answered in unison.

Scáthach nodded, pleased, before turning to the messengers and commanding them to assess the state of the walls. “As soon as they return,” she continued, looking back at her aides, “we will commit every last man to the assault and break this fort.”

“Of course, Your Highness,” Rache answered. “What is to be done with the defenders?”

“Capture those who surrender. Show no mercy to those who resist.”

“I will tell the officers.” The man nodded and turned to leave the command tent, but was suddenly stopped in his tracks.

“Urgent!” a voice cried out. “I bring urgent news!”

A messenger stumbled into the tent, visibly out of breath. The aides paused in their duties and turned as one toward the entrance.

“What is it?” Scáthach asked, joining her subordinates in frowning at the man.

“We’re under attack, Your Highness! From the rear! The commander of the rearguard requests reinforcements!”

“Under attack?” she repeated dumbly.

The messenger struck the ground with his fist in a fit of frustration. “They carry a dragon bearing a silver blade on a black field!” he cried, propelling spittle across the tent. “There’s no mistaking it! It’s the scion of Mars! The One-Eyed Dragon!”

Confusion ran through Scáthach's aides. One by one, their faces grew pale.

"That cannot be! Is he not attacking Draal?!"

"He should have been! That was why Lord Puppchen withdrew his forces!"

"Might you not be mistaken?" one man asked. "The reports said that he attacked with fewer than five thousand men, but the grand duchy has thirty thousand at the least. How could he have overcome such odds?"

"There is no mistake, my lord! The enemy bears the War God's standard!"

Even under questioning, the messenger stayed insistent that the situation was critical, but the aides remained unconvinced. It was not easy for them to stomach the arrival of a new force on the cusp of victory—and the scion of Mars, no less.

"The dark must have had you seeing things! Go and check again! That will settle this!"

"No," Scáthach interrupted. "That will not be necessary."

"Your Highness?"

"Letting ourselves panic over imagined threats will only play into the enemy's hands. Let us take a moment to cool our heads." A fierce will blazed in her eyes, silencing her anxious subordinates. "Why do you fear this scion of Mars so? What threat is he to us?"

"Your Highness, if the rumors are to be believed..."

"They are never to be believed. Only a fool would let them cloud his judgment." Scáthach slammed down a fist and stared around the table. "His title is just that, a title. Do not lose sight of what matters. We must drive back these faithless imperials, rout them if we can."

She picked up her azure spear and stalked toward the entrance, making no attempt to hide her anger. With a weary sigh, Rache fell in behind her. The rest of the aides followed a second later once their shock had worn off.

"Where are you going, Your Highness?!" one of them asked.

"Where else? To the rear. I will repel them myself." Scáthach beckoned the

messenger. "Have we an account of their numbers?"

"The dark makes it hard to tell, Your Highness, but a thousand at least."

"And how are our own forces faring?"

"Poorly, I fear. The enemy struck with tremendous force. Officers are falling by the minute, leaving the men close to rout."

Scáthach glanced toward the back lines, where all should have been peaceful. Instead, there rose the clamor of clashing swords, the gut-shaking rumble of hoofbeats, the piercing noise of battle cries. Tents had been set alight, the blaze dyeing the night sky a fierce red.

She looked at Rache. "How many men can we muster at short notice?"

"A hundred riders, perhaps. We have committed the rest to the front lines."

So she was supposed to lead only one hundred men on a wild chase in the darkness, hunting an enemy cutting deep into their lines who could ambush them at any time, and somehow defeat them all. That was a fool's errand. She lifted a defeated gaze to the sky, where the stars shone oblivious to her plight.

"Still, so long as a chance remains..."

Then she would do her utmost to bring it about.

"Rache, bring me my horse."

"At once, Your Highness."

The sea of soldiers parted around him as he dashed away into the darkness. Once he was out of sight, Scáthach turned back to her aides, her face sober.

"First, allow me to express my gratitude. Thank you, all of you, for accompanying me on this selfish vendetta of mine."

They knelt as one, sensing her resolve. The corners of her eyes crinkled a little to see their loyalty.

"It is only because of your tireless efforts that we have come this far."

She thanked them all, one by one, laying an appreciative hand on their shoulders and whispering her gratitude. When at last she was done, she raised an imperious hand.

“I leave this battle in your care. There is but one command that I would have you convey to the men.”

“Whatever you ask, Your Highness! Our lives are yours!”

In all of their eyes was unwavering faith that she would order them to fight to the bitter end—to lay down their lives for Faerzen, perhaps, or to fight until their last breaths to see their homeland restored. That only made it more painful to betray them.

“Flee.”

Their faces crumpled at the word. That was not what they had hoped to hear. They stared at her in disbelief.

“Why?!”

The question was on one man’s lips, but in all of their hearts.

“We’ll stand with you to the end, Your Highness!”

“That’s right! We’ll not turn and run while you’re still fighting!”

More followed with tearful pleas, but Scáthach hardened her heart and narrowed her eyes. “This is my final order as your commander,” she said firmly. “As the last remaining scion of Faerzen’s royal line.”

To defy a royal decree was unthinkable—and yet, the aides were undaunted. One after another, they drove their blades into the earth.

“Then you’ll have to lop off all our heads!”

“Aye, he’s the right of it! If we’re a burden to you, Your Highness, then we choose death!”

“Do you believe us so fainthearted as to balk at slender odds? Do you truly think so little of us?!”

Scáthach stepped back, overwhelmed by her subordinates’ fervor. At that moment, Rache arrived with her horse.

“I suspect that you have lost the argument, Your Highness.”

“Rache?”

“There is but one queen we revere and one queen we will follow.” He flashed a wry grin and shrugged. ““Do not lose sight of what matters. We must drive back these faithless imperials.’ Your words, I believe?”

He handed her the reins. As she took them, stunned, he sank into the same bow as the rest of the aides.

“We are yours to command, my queen,” he declared. “Set us upon Faerzen’s enemies, as is your right.”

“You pack of fools...” Despite herself, Scáthach could not help but smile. She mounted her horse. “Stay, then, and devote your utmost efforts to taking the fort. I will worry about the rest.”

“What? But, Your Highness...then nothing has changed!”

“Would you have me leave my army with no commanders? Besides, after this show of insubordination, I do not think you have any right to refuse.”

That proved decisive. Unable to argue, Rache and the aides fell silent. At last, while their faces remained conflicted, they began to nod—although they still had their objections, they were grateful simply to be allowed to share the same battlefield as their liege.

“In the meantime,” Scáthach concluded, “I will make my way to the back lines and take this One-Eyed Dragon’s head.”

Rache’s lips tightened. “With no escort? Allow me to accompany you, at the very least.”

“No. It will be hard enough to tell friend from foe in such chaos. To bring an escort would risk becoming separated, if not killing one another.”

Instead, she would wage a one-woman war. With Gáe Bolg at her side, it could be done.

“Rache, you will remain here and defend the encampment. Is that understood?”

The man fell silent for a long moment but eventually assented. “Yes, Your Highness.”

Scáthach pulled on the reins. Her horse’s neigh echoed across the battlefield,

announcing her presence to the very heavens. She set off at a gallop and soon vanished into the darkness.

She knew when she had reached the battle by the sound of dying screams. The enemy was attacking from all directions, turning the field into a hellish vision of carnage and butchery. The rearguard was crumbling beneath the fierce assault. Some had lost their wits and were running around hysterically; others breathed their last, aflame and shrieking. From the heavens fell a ceaseless rain of death.

“Argh!” An enemy soldier collapsed with a gurgle, her twenty-eighth kill.

“To think they had cut so deep...”

If she had taken any longer, the enemy would have begun to encroach on the main camp.

Another soldier lunged at her. “I’ll take your head!”

“Out of my way.”

“Ghurk?!”

A thrust through the throat dispatched him. Scáthach spurred her horse over the corpses of her countrymen, her face contorted with fury. There was no time to tangle with foot soldiers. She had to find the One-Eyed Dragon, but tracking down one man on a chaotic battlefield—in the dark, no less—was like searching for a needle in a haystack.

“Could I have misjudged him?” she wondered aloud. Imperial commanders typically led from the rear, leisurely surveying the battlefield from afar, but a few gloried in fighting on the front lines. “Perhaps this One-Eyed Dragon is the latter kind...”

She scowled and turned her horse about. At that moment, something caught her eye.

“Could it be...?”

A cluster of torches wavered in the darkness. With faint hope in her chest, Scáthach drove her mount toward the light. If her memory did not fail her, that was where she had put the sixth princess’s frozen body on display.

As she drew closer, understanding dawned. A black-clad man crouched in front of the pillar of ice, surrounded by a cluster of soldiers. A chill ran down her spine at the sight of him. Never before had she seen a human being exude such raw might. In that moment, she knew that she had found the One-Eyed Dragon.

“There you are!” With a cry of savage joy, she leaned forward in the saddle and spurred her horse into a charge, Gáe Bolg raised and ready.

Needless to say, the noise did not go unnoticed. “Who are you?!” a soldier cried.

“She who will bring you the peace of death!”

As the torches swung to face her, she leaped from horseback to soar high through the night sky. A spear reached for her, but she twisted around it in midair, Gáe Bolg’s tip glinting as she drove it into its wielder’s throat. His collapsing body provided a foothold to launch herself back into the air. The acrobatic maneuver left her next target stunned for a few crucial seconds—long enough for her Spiritblade’s haft to crush his skull. As brain matter sprayed, she ran a third man through, then turned the thrust into a backhanded swing that cut down a fourth. The fifth she tore from horseback with the sheer strength of her arm and flung beneath the hooves of his own steed.

“Lady Huginn! Take Lord Hiro and—!”

“No one escapes me!”

A crack of azure lightning speared the sixth man through the gut. A gout of blood sprayed from his mouth and he slid from his horse, a gaping hole blown in his abdomen.

At last, Scáthach stopped and thrust Gáe Bolg into the earth. “A knight does not kill women or children,” she announced. “Lower your weapon and you will not be harmed.”

The words were directed to the bow-wielding soldier standing in her way. The woman had the olive skin of the south and a face that might crack easily into a cheerful grin. Her hands trembled, like a mouse caught in the gaze of a cat. Still, she did not turn to run. The One-Eyed Dragon evidently had her loyalty. Through her fear shone valiant resolve—she would rather give her life and meet

a wretched end than live with the regret of abandoning him.

It would be a waste to cut down such a noble heart, Scáthach thought, but that only inflamed her anger. “For how long do you mean to hide behind women’s skirts?!” she roared.

The imperial soldier flinched like a jolt of electricity had run through her body, even though she had not been the target of the shout. Scáthach’s voice had been loud, fit to carry across a battlefield, and it had reached many ears. She might as well have announced her position to the enemy. In short order, the air was abuzz with imperial soldiers clamoring to see if the One-Eyed Dragon was safe. Even so, she had been unable to restrain her outrage. Many men had died in this man’s defense. Even now, this woman was mustering the resolve to give her life for him.

“And yet you sit on the ground like a dog!”

He had might, but no spirit. She could sense nothing from him but emptiness.

“If you refuse to face me, I’ll take your head and be done with it!”

Uncaring of the unsettling aura wreathing him, she readied Gáe Bolg.

* * * * *

It felt as though a wall had fallen. That was no blessing. It was a wall that should have remained unbreached, the last bulwark erected to defend his humanity. Yet faced with the sight before him, holding back the impulse rising from the pit of his stomach was next to impossible.

Given enough time, hatred turns to anger, anger to grief, and grief to mirth. After enough cycles, one arrives at an empty void. Yet human emotions, ever curious things, cannot be truly destroyed. They persist even after one believes them gone, smoldering in some hidden place, and at the slightest provocation will show their faces again, altering the psyche with shocking results—the dissolution of reason, reversion to bestial instinct. A phenomenon known as the urge to slaughter.

Huginn was the first to notice the cold fury emanating from Hiro. “Your Lordship?” she asked tentatively.

“Just how long do you mean to ignore me?” the Resistance soldier demanded of him.

The woman had appeared from nowhere and slaughtered Huginn’s subordinates in the blink of an eye. Even that short glimpse of her spearwork had told Huginn that she was no match—but that left one question unanswered.

“No closer! I’m warning you!”

She nocked an arrow and leveled it at the knight, fearful of letting anybody disturb Hiro in his unstable state, but the woman ignored her and took a step toward him.

“My name is Culann Scáthach du Faerzen. I would know yours.”

Hiro gave no reply. His dead eyes saw nothing but Liz.

“I told you, don’t go near him!” Huginn scowled. Some people just didn’t listen. How could such a skilled warrior be so ignorant of what was happening?

Oblivious to Huginn’s fears, Scáthach fixed Hiro with a glare, her anger swelling. “I cast aside my very pride to fight this battle, yet with the hour of my vengeance at hand, I find you standing in my way. And you will not even do me the courtesy of telling me your name!”

Her ire resounded across the field, but still Hiro did not respond.

“I will teach you to make a fool of me!”

With her patience finally frayed, Scáthach lunged at Hiro with spear in hand.

“No! Don’t you touch him!” Huginn sensed the attack coming and loosed a barrage of arrows.

Scáthach struck the volley down with her bare hands. “To challenge me is to challenge the Boreal Sovereign,” she declared. “Fall back if you value your life.”

“You’ve got a Spiritblade?” Huginn blurted out. She had heard a little about the Spiritblade Sovereigns from Hiro, who had warned her to turn and flee if she ever encountered one. Suddenly, Scáthach’s actions made more sense—Gáe Bolg’s presence in her hand must have been dulling her awareness of the looming danger.

“A strike from behind ill befits a knight,” Scáthach said, “but I will not waste honor on discourteous men.”

She leaped high, shifting her spear from a high guard to a low one, and plunged down like a thunderbolt. It was a strike that no ordinary man could evade, forceful enough to send its target flying—but not only did the billowing hem of the Black Camellia bat her speartip aside, its fabric sharpened into a spike that launched a vicious riposte.

“What in the world—?!”

With a scowl, she twisted to avoid the strike, escaping with only a shallow slice across her cheek, but before she could so much as recover her balance, a pitch-black spear came hurtling toward her. She blanched and sprang back, deflecting the onyx point inches from her face, but that was only the first droplet of a deluge that forced her back yet again.

“What trickery resides in that garb?!”

The slightest hesitation, the most marginal loss of composure, the tiniest whisper of fear—all would spell instant death. The unfolding battle permitted not the single blink of an eye. Lances crafted from inky night tore through the air with fearsome speed, and yet Scáthach struck each and every one aside with perfect timing, matching the Black Camellia for monstrosity.

“What...is this...*sorcery*?!” With her chest heaving, she looked up—and her heart almost stopped. “What? When did you...?”

Hiro stood before her, having closed the distance between them with fearsome speed. Curiously, neither moved to attack. Scáthach only stared the boy down, her lips twisting into a bitter grin.

As a warrior herself, if not one of Scáthach’s caliber, Huginn could sense why the woman had frozen: she had caught sight of Hiro’s black eyes.

“Now I see. You bear Uranos.”

An ascended state of mind, a martial artist might have called it. A kind of mastery attainable only with a lifetime of training, and even then only by a select few. The ability to see the flow of an opponent’s breath in a handful of exhaled air particles, and so divine their intent.

“Just how much power resides in that small frame?” she whispered, half in dread and half in wonder. “Are you even human?”

Hiro’s mouth formed an unsettling smile. His very presence imposed quiet—no, silence, an enforced absence of noise. In the stillness, a dispassionate voice issued from his lips.

“Held Rey Schwartz von Grantz.”

He raised his hand to touch the eyepatch covering the left side of his face. His power swelled, setting the air groaning beneath its weight. Malice and murder swirled about him, twisting the surrounding space into a singular and uncanny domain.

He spoke again, in words steeped in darkness.

That is the name of your death.

Then came Excalibur, stained black, the instrument of his intent to kill. Scáthach blocked the point-blank slash, but its sheer weight cratered the earth beneath her feet. The effort forced a grunt from her throat. Not a moment later, Hiro’s right leg lashed in from her peripheral vision. She managed to raise her left arm to block but could not withstand the force of the kick, which swept her aside like a broom might dust.

“Very well. My turn.”

As soon as she landed, she lunged forward again, streaking toward Hiro to launch a blistering counteroffensive. Gáe Bolg lashed out viciously, seeking to pierce his vitals, but deft strokes of his blade foiled all of its attempts.

Scáthach did not so much as blink as sparks showered around her. Even as her assault was summarily deflected, her confident grin never faltered.

“Let me show you my true strength!”

With a voice as clear and unblemished as the wind, she invoked Gáe Bolg’s Graal. Its nature was Surestrike, and its name was Sainglend. Storm clouds obscured the stars twinkling in the sky above as a tempest began to blow.

“My Spiritblade tells me that you are Excalibur’s chosen.”

Spears of ice appeared in the heavens, blanketing the sky even as their chill

called the storm. The temperature began to plummet. Combat on the ground halted as the participants looked up, alarmed by the sudden change in weather.

“Then I need show you no quarter! Take their hearts—Gáe Bolg!”

Scáthach flung down her arms. The deluge of spears fell upon the land below. White mist shrouded the battlefield, the ground split, and the earth shuddered. Yet even as the destruction threatened to engulf him, Hiro was unmoved. He stared nonchalantly at the looming cataclysm, making no move to flee.

“Run, Your Lordship!”

Huginn’s scream rang through the air as the sky darkened to black, but her warning came too late. A haphazard carpet of ice-wrought spears covered the area where Hiro had been standing. She fell to her knees in horror.

Scáthach only snorted in astonishment. “Fear not. He still lives. A strange thing—it seems Sainglend could not touch him.”

A gust of wind carried the mist away, sending a chill fierce enough to freeze the lungs spilling out across the ground. As the field cleared, Hiro came into view, alive and unharmed. Around him was a clearing in the forest of spears, a perfect circle of empty space.

“I see. So that is the Black Camellia’s protection.” Scáthach retreated a healthy distance from him as she caught her breath. “Such power... What depths you must have reached. Both the Heavenly Sovereign and the Black Camellia... It is a wonder you can wield such opposing forces without losing your mind.”

Hiro, as ever, gave no answer. He did not even move. He simply stood, staring, his black eyes boring into her. She shuddered, and not from the cold. Everything about him screamed that he would pursue her to the end of the world.

“And there’s something else in you, isn’t there? At first I thought it was Uranos I sensed, but my Spiritblade is adamant that it is not so. Tell me—who are you, truly?”

Again, Hiro said nothing.

With a defeated shrug, Scáthach readied Gáe Bolg again. “Then I will take my answers from your corpse. The Black Camellia will not save you from what comes next.”

Raw cold billowed from her azure spear. Gray smoke spewed across the ground, dyeing the world the color of ash.

“There is no shield in this world that the Boreal Sovereign cannot sunder.”

Thence came Gáe Bolg’s greatest art. Macha—Godpiercer.

Power erupted from her in a concussive blast. Her azure spear bore down on Hiro like striking lightning, only for him to intercept it with a dexterous twirl of the Black Camellia. His dark garb opened its maw wide and swallowed the weapon whole.

Scáthach watched, stupefied—and smiled. “Look above you. That was but a feint.”

She pointed to the sky. Hiro followed the arc of her finger to see the true Gáe Bolg streaking toward him, trailing sound waves and frozen water vapor in its wake. The Black Camellia was preoccupied with devouring the spear of ice, leaving him defenseless. He moved to dodge, only to find that he could not.

“Sainglend froze your feet to the ground. There is no escape.”

Scáthach’s voice came in labored pants. She had used up too much strength, and fatigue was showing on her elegant features. Yet even with her chest heaving, she raised a fist to Hiro in defiance of her exhaustion.

“This battle is mine.”

Gáe Bolg slammed into him with pulverizing force, releasing a detonation like a thundercrack and sending up an enormous plume of soil. The blast wave sent him flying through the air. He smacked bodily into Liz’s prison of ice, and then the dust cloud swallowed him and he was lost from sight.

Hiro snapped awake in an instant. Hot agony lanced through his stomach, forcing a leaden breath from his lungs.

“Ngh... Gah!”

The stagnant emptiness in his eyes gave way to bright acuity, and the

darkness hanging over his mind was rapidly dispelled. Leaning against the sturdy surface behind him, he glanced down at his side. Crimson poured out in formidable quantities, spurting from the wound like a tap left on full force.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve seen my own blood.”

That, he supposed, was the price of letting anger dull his reflexes, but at least it had opened his eyes. The chill plane behind him soothed his burning flesh, as though imploring him to cool his head. He turned to see Liz, still trapped in her frozen cage.

“I owe you one,” he murmured. “Thanks to you, I’ve come to my senses.”

The corners of his eyes crinkled a little with sadness. He rose to his feet. The neat hole in his side had already closed. A wave of unease passed through him at the sight of the supernatural regeneration.

“I really did come close to turning into a monster.”

Where had he strayed from the path? Where had he left his emotions by the wayside? It was enough to make him wonder if he was really human after all.

“You took my best, and still you stand?” The voice carried through the dust cloud, shocked to its core.

Hiro turned. A frigid wind carried the dust away to reveal Scáthach, staring at him with naked incredulity.

“How is it that you live? Are you truly human? Anyone would take you for a —”

“You don’t have to finish that sentence. I’m just a little harder than most people, that’s all.”

He walked toward her with a leisurely gait. In his hand, Excalibur gleamed brilliant white once more.

On a sudden instinct, Scáthach raised Gáe Bolg in a high guard. Not a split second later, an impact rang through her bones. The ground shattered beneath her feet, burying her up to her ankles in rubble.

“Now,” Hiro said, “for real this time.”

He raised his right hand and clicked his fingers. The space around him began to warp. The air was rent open with a faint *pop*, then another, and another. From those gashes in space emerged spirit weapons, hanging in the night sky like a blanket of terrestrial stars. Scáthach gazed in wonder at the ethereal sight. It was as though the heavens and the earth had inverted, so warm and gentle was their light.

“What a curious man you are,” she said, hefting Gáe Bolg.

Hiro raised Excalibur to match her. “I won’t hold back if you don’t.”

Scáthach nodded. “My well is almost dry. On this next strike I bet my all.”

She sprang backward and raised Gáe Bolg behind her head. Power swelled within her, setting the air groaning with the strain—and once more, she unleashed the Boreal Sovereign’s Graal. The water vapor in the air around her froze and condensed into a forest of icy spears, all of them trained on the black-haired boy before her.

Hiro said nothing. He didn’t even take up a stance. He emanated no fear, no doubts, nothing at all—nothing but power, which radiated from him in fearsome quantities. He took one step forward and the earth cracked beneath his feet, unable to bear his might.

The nature of the Heavenly Sovereign’s Graal was Godspeed, and its name was Lucifer.

The spirit weapons around him flared with blinding light, all of them pointed at Scáthach...

And the world trembled.

By the hourglass, their match took only seconds, but to Huginn, looking on from the sidelines, it seemed to last an eternity. Hundreds, thousands, millions of blows were exchanged in the blink of an eye. Sovereign clashed with Sovereign, and the collision of their wills echoed through the heavens themselves. Their battle could only be sensed, not seen. The naked eye could not keep track.

This was a duel between Spiritblades, a battle fought upon a pinnacle far beyond the reach of mortal men. Even judging who had the upper hand was an

impossible task, yet before Huginn knew it, the victor was decided.

“And so it ends. With my defeat.”

Scáthach lay flat on her back. Above her, the storm clouds began to disperse, allowing the stars to shine through bright and clear.

“Yet it seems I have been spared the fatal blow.”

Countless wounds scored her flesh, but none were mortal. She could keep fighting. She gritted her teeth and fought to rise.

“I cannot fall here. I have...a duty...”

But for all her determination, her strength was spent. She collapsed face down on the earth. Weeping bitter tears, she struck her head against the ground.

“Curse it all...”

As she began to sob, Hiro wordlessly approached her.

She raised her head at the crunch of footsteps. “Do you mean to kill me?”

Hiro said nothing. He only leveled Excalibur’s blade at her throat.

“If I must fall here,” she continued, “then I would have you deliver a message to Administrator Buze and First Prince Stovell.”

“What message?”

“Tell them death will not keep me from my vengeance.”

The hatred in her glare would have chilled most men to the bone, but it only piqued Hiro’s interest. “May I ask why?”

“It’s not a pleasant story.”

“Don’t tell it if you don’t want to. Everyone has things they’d rather not talk about.”

She stared at him for a long moment, but at last, her eyes lowered dejectedly. “My studies took me out of the kingdom when the invasion struck...but the rest of my family were not so lucky.”

While Scáthach’s studies in Six Kingdoms had spared her from personal harm,

she had returned home to find Faerzen's once-proud capital in ruins, its surviving residents butchered by imperial soldiers or treated as slaves. Her brothers had been beheaded, her younger sisters snatched away for Stovell's amusement. The latter's heads had later returned preserved in salt.

"I told you it wasn't a pleasant story," she said once her tale was told.

"No," Hiro said. "It certainly isn't."

"Now, if you've satisfied your curiosity, take my head and be done with this." She laid down her head for the blade, chivalrous to the end.

"You're quick to choose death for someone with so much vengeance in her heart."

"I am all too aware that you have good reason to want my life." She cast a glance at Liz's frozen figure.

Hiro followed her gaze for a moment before his eyes flicked back. "Perhaps so. If she actually was dead, I really might have killed you."

But there was no mistaking it—Liz was alive. If Scáthach had truly meant to kill her, she wouldn't have gone to the trouble of sealing her in ice. It served too poorly as a warning. Human beings avert their eyes from the ugly but struggle to feel animosity for the beautiful. The sight of her body hale and whole would convey no threat of cruelty, and with whether she was truly dead in question, any anger the display provoked would not last. If Scáthach's goal had been to stoke rage and hatred in the defenders, a severed head would have done far better.

"But you didn't kill her. Why?"

"A knight does not kill women or children. In any case, my grudge is not with her. It would have shamed the blood in my veins to take her life."

"So it was a matter of pride?"

Scáthach nodded. "As the last survivor of Faerzen's royal line, I have a duty to maintain a princess's dignity. And in any case,"—she fixed him with a level gaze—"I will not stain my parents' honor."

Hiro found himself smiling. She and he were two of a kind. Their driving desire

to protect the legacy of those dear to them, their burning vengeance poorly tempered with lingering naivete—they were all too similar.

“Does that amuse you?” she asked.

“No, sorry. Just an old memory.” His face took on a more serious cast. “I’ve decided I will spare your life.”

Scáthach’s eyes went wide. “Excuse me?”

Hiro gave a nonchalant shrug. It was not out of pity that he was letting her live, nor had he suffered a change of heart and decided to aid her cause. The prospect of killing her simply sat poorly with him. To take her life here, now, after she had suffered so cruelly at the hands of the emperor and Stovell, sounded like the punch line of a bad joke. The architects of her misery were still alive, living leisurely with smiles on their faces, and that...that could not stand.

“Why this sudden mercy? I do not understand. It was I who treated your sixth princess so, and that is not my only crime. I slew scores of your soldiers. I brought hardship upon your people. Why, after all I have done, would you let me live?”

Scáthach shook her head in dismay. Her voice held no relief at her stay of execution. If anything, it seemed almost pleading.

“Ah. Now I see.”

At last, Hiro understood what drove her. She wanted to die. She had lost her parents, her siblings, her home, her place in the world. By gathering her old comrades in a quest for revenge, she had managed to hold herself together, but deep down, she had been searching for a grave—a punishment for failing to save her family, and atonement for the harm her vengeance had done to her soldiers and countrymen. And if that was so...

“Nobody can live without causing pain to others,” Hiro said. “If you think that requires atonement, then by all means, choose death. But that would not be an answer, only cowardice and conceit.” He leaned in closer, bringing his mouth to her ear. “If you still want to give up your life, then give it up to me. I will make you my sword and shield.”

His words bordered on arrogance. They certainly left Scáthach lost for words.

But anything less, he knew, would not be enough to turn her away from her path of self-destruction. He had to give her hope.

“Join me, and when the time is ripe—”

The end of his sentence was interrupted by the victory cry that rose from the imperial troops, but from the way her eyes widened, she had heard it all the same. The seconds passed by, and understanding dawned. By the time she answered with a resolute nod, the light had returned to her eyes.

* * * * *

The twenty-fifth day of the eleventh month of Imperial Year 1023

Three days had passed since the final battle for Fort Mitte. The significant number of Resistance soldiers who had fled into the night after it became clear the battle was lost still remained at large. It was unlikely that they would provoke large-scale conflict, but small skirmishes would inevitably soon break out across the province. Defeat would not quench the guerrillas’ hatred, and they would not lay down their arms while their countrymen continued to suffer. It would be a long, long time before peace came to Faerzen.

Once again, the Grantzian Empire would find itself obliged to spend an exorbitant amount of gold. Endless conflict had ravaged Faerzen, leaving its people with no homes and its soldiers with nowhere to go. Whether they turned to banditry, brigandry, or burglary, in time, looting would break out across the land, and the resulting stench of blood would attract monsters to prey on those who remained. A large-scale military deployment would be necessary to reestablish order.

But the west doesn’t have those kinds of numbers to spare.

So who would field them? Hiro saw the answer and expelled a heavy sigh. He was standing in front of a bed in the makeshift sickbay erected in the central courtyard of Fort Mitte. On top of the clean, white sheets lay Liz, breathing softly. He gently squeezed her hand.

“What else? Oh, of course, Tris and Cerberus are doing well. They were both injured in the battle, but the doctors say it’s nothing life-threatening. You wouldn’t believe how much food they’re shoveling down.”

His words were met with no response. He lowered his gaze sadly.

“Now we’re all just waiting for you to wake up.” He continued in measured tones, trying his hardest to keep his emotions from showing in his voice. “It’s like we’ve swapped places, don’t you think? I remember how much you fussed over me back then.”

Shortly after his arrival in Aletia, his overuse of Uranos had flooded his brain with an unbearable quantity of information, sending him into a delirious stupor. Although he had been little more than a stranger at the time, Liz had taken personal charge of nursing him back to health. Her kindness had almost overwhelmed him when he regained consciousness. It was for that reason that, after learning of her situation, he had sworn a private vow to support her, come what may. That vow remained engraved in his heart, although very different emotions now swelled in his chest to recall it.

“Say, Liz...what do you think my endgame *really* is?”

What would she think when she learned of his true intentions—those he had not divulged to anyone? He had decided what needed to be done. Very little could alter it now. There was, however, room for one small mercy.

With a sheepish smile, he stroked her hand tenderly, his fingers brushing still-fresh scars. “When the time comes, I want you to be the one—”

“How is she?” a voice interrupted.

Hiro swung around in alarm. Aura stood in the sickbay entrance. With her head swathed in bandages, she made for almost as pitiful a sight as Liz.

She cocked her head. “What?”

“How long have you been there?”

“I...I only just arrived.” Aura’s gray eyes tracked from Liz to Hiro, then spontaneously flooded with guilt. She plunged into a sudden bow. “This is my fault. Apologies won’t make it right. I know. But still.”

She looked back up, fists clenched, eyes fighting back tears. Her normally expressionless face brimmed with emotion.

“I take full responsibility.”

In her eyes was the resolve to accept any punishment or reprimand. She, too, would bear lasting scars from this battle, even if they could not be seen with the eye.

Nothing he could say would get through to her in that state. Words of comfort would have no effect. Instead, he only smiled. "I'm glad you're all right."

A small gasp slipped from Aura's throat. She bit her lip and looked down at the ground, as though struggling not to cry.

"Your plan was a good one," he said. "It wasn't at fault."

Still, there was no denying reality. Her plan had failed, resulting in heavy losses for the empire. Having Hiro to defend her would hopefully lessen her punishment, but she would not escape this debacle unscathed.

"The next few weeks aren't going to be easy. You're in a precarious position."

Aura gave a mute nod. She knew the stakes, and the steely glint in her eyes showed that she was prepared for however the dice might fall.

"You'll have it worse," she said.

Hiro had not only driven the Draali forces from Faerzen, he had secured assurances that the Grand Duchy would shoulder a portion of the empire's losses from the fighting. On top of that, he had rescued Liz, a Spiritblade wielder, as well as Aura herself, whom most had given up for dead. The unprecedented achievement was certain to alarm House Krone and their central nobles. First Prince Stovell and the other imperial heirs, too, would no longer be content to scheme in the shadows; they would step out into the light.

"I know. But I won't get overconfident, and I won't slip up." He would not let what had occurred here happen again. A renewed resolve burned in his breast to protect those dear to him.

Aura nodded in agreement as though sensing his determination. A moment passed and then she cocked her head apropos nothing, as if remembering something. "I did as you asked. Administrator Buze is in the war room."

"Thank you. I'd better go. I wouldn't want to keep him waiting."

“Of course.”

“Could you watch Liz while I’m gone? The doctor says she could regain consciousness at any moment.”

“That sounds like Buze can wait.”

“No, I’m afraid he can’t. I need to deal with this before Liz wakes up.”

Hiro excused himself from the sickbay. The morning sun greeted him as he stepped outside. Soldiers dashed to and fro. They were doing grim work—cleaning the fort to prevent the spread of sickness, disposing of corpses—but every one of them attended to their tasks without complaint. As he made his way from the bustling courtyard up to the walls, he flagged down a company of sentries and commanded them to join him.

The war room was located in the small tower erected in the middle of the battlements above the main gate. A large host of soldiers waited outside.

One man stepped forward as Hiro approached. “Greetings, Lord Hiro. We have been waiting for you.”

The man was Aura’s aide, von Spitz. Back on the streets of the capital, his handsome face would have raised squeals of delight from passing ladies, but now it was lined with exhaustion and sleep deprivation. The rest of Aura’s aides stood around him, their expressions apprehensive.

Von Spitz jerked a thumb toward the door. “He awaits you within.”

Before Hiro could reply, the man straightened his posture and dropped to one knee, his head lowered in a deep bow. The rest of Aura’s aides mirrored the gesture.

“Thank you, Your Highness. We owe you our lives.”

It was unusual for von Spitz to be so forthcoming with his gratitude. The defense of the fort must have been harrowing indeed. Hiro patted the man on the shoulder and gave a small shake of his head—*don’t worry about it*—but von Spitz remained kneeling, his gaze fixed firmly on the ground.

“Shameless though it may be, I must ask that you show Brigadier General von Bunadala clemency. She is not to blame for what happened to Lady Celia

Estrella. The fault lies not with her strategy, but with our failure to carry it out. Your Highness, I beg you—please petition His Majesty on her behalf!”

Although nobody present spoke the words, they were clearly all willing to offer their heads if need be. Aura was truly blessed with loyal subordinates.

“Don’t worry,” Hiro said. “She won’t escape punishment, but it shouldn’t be too severe.”

“Do you speak truly?!” Von Spitz’s eyes widened. Behind him, the other aides’ expressions brightened.

“I do. You can return to your duties with your minds at ease. I’ll take care of business here.”

“At once, Your Highness! We leave Lady Aura in your care!”

The aides bowed low once more. Hiro dismissed them, his smile just a little fixed.

Once they were gone, he knocked twice on the tower door then entered with his escort. Seated inside with an anxious expression was the administrator of Faerzen, Buze von Krone.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting,” Hiro said.

“Why, Lord Hiro! What an unexpected honor!” As soon as Buze registered Hiro’s identity, he sprang from his seat and bowed.

Hiro did not return the gesture, only staring back at the man coolly. “Do you know why I have summoned you here?”

“N-No, Your Highness,” Buze stammered. “I fear you have me at a loss.” He looked visibly confused; he truly seemed not to know.

“Would you look at this man for me? Perhaps he will jog your memory.”

Hiro gestured to one of the guards he had brought in. The soldier removed his helmet to reveal the face of Rache du Vertra, glaring at Buze with hate-filled eyes.

“It has been far too long, *Administrator*.”

“Y-You?! But...why are you here?! You cannot be here!”

It was not hard to see why Buze was shocked. Rache had served in the Faerzen Resistance, and before that as captain of the royal guard. He was an enemy of the empire, with no place in an imperial encampment.

“Lord Hiro!” Buze’s voice was a panicked yelp. “What is the meaning of this?!”

Hiro smiled serenely. “These men and I have, shall we say, established a working relationship. But they need some assurance that I’m not going to go back on my word. You’re going to be that assurance.”

“Y-You cannot mean...! This is preposterous— What are you doing?! Stop this at once!”

More soldiers from Hiro’s escort seized the protesting Buze from behind and forced him into an armlock. They, too, were men of the Resistance. After the end of the battle, Hiro had successfully snuck Rache and a small group of followers into the fort, disguised them as Crow Legion soldiers, and sent them to patrol the walls. It had been no great challenge—even setting aside his rank, nobody would question the activities of a prince of the empire.

“I warn you, Lord Hiro!” Buze squealed. “Kill me and you’ll regret it!”

Hiro snorted dismissively. “And why is that?”

“House Krone will not overlook my disappearance! Suspicion will fall first upon you, with your ties to the east—and then every noble in the central territories will be your enemy!”

“And?”

“And...? Erm...what?”

As Buze’s tongue tied itself in a knot, Hiro shot a meaningful glance at the soldier restraining him.

“Ungh!”

A heavy blow caught Buze in the back of the head. His eyes rolled back and he slumped to the floor, out like a light. Hiro looked down at him coldly and breathed a small sigh.

“I think I’ve had enough of this.”

No matter where he went, House Krone's foul misdeeds seemed to lurk around every corner. He was more than angry now; he was murderous.

"House Krone will go the same way you did before long," he said as the Resistance soldiers stuffed Buze into a sack.

Once the men were done with their task, he approached Rache.

"You have my thanks, Lord Hiro," he said.

"Don't thank me yet. I still haven't kept my word."

"Nonetheless. You have done us a great service."

"You'd better get out of here before Buze's subordinates notice he's missing. This is a chance you can't afford to waste."

With a nod, Rache commanded one of his subordinates to lift Buze onto his back. In more peaceful times, the group would have attracted suspicion, but with the fort consumed by the chaos of the cleanup, nobody would look at them twice. They would be able to escape without notice.

"We shall be away, then."

"Remember, I want to know everything he tells you."

"You can count on us. We'll wring *something* useful from him before we're done."

With a bow, Rache departed, his subordinates in tow. Once they were out of sight, Hiro exited the war room and quietly descended the stairs to ground level.

I think it's about time for House Krone to take their last bow.

First Prince Stovell would not take that lying down, of course. He was certain to stand in Hiro's way, and that would risk escalating into a confrontation with the emperor himself. No matter how Hiro proceeded, the situation seemed doomed to remain unpredictable.

But I've assembled a good hand. I can win this game—I just have to play it right.

He set out, not back to Liz's sickbed, but outside of the fort entirely. The scars

of war lingered on the landscape, fresh and raw. The fresher bodies had been disposed of to stave off disease, but countless charred corpses doubtless remained beneath the ashes of burned tents that were all that remained of the Resistance encampment. Silence shrouded the place like an ancient ruin, and discarded swords and spears littered the ground. Still-smoldering fires licked at fresh greenery, the smoke mingling with the stagnant air to form an acrid stink. Flocks of crows circled overhead, lured in search of pickings by the hint of blood in the mix.

At last, Hiro came to his destination: a tent notably larger than its abandoned fellows. It lay squarely in the center of the camp, as befitted its status as the commander's abode. His step betrayed no hesitation as he made his way inside.

"I thought I'd find you here," he said.

In the open space in the center of the tent, kneeling with her knees together, was a woman—Culann Scáthach du Faerzen.

"And I thought you might come," she said, glancing back over her shoulder. "I hear that Buze von Krone is now in Rache's hands. You are a man of your word, and for that you have my thanks." She lay her hands on the ground and lowered her head in a deep bow.

"I'll tell you what I told Rache—don't thank me yet. I still haven't made good on my word."

"Even so, you have delivered that faithless traitor into our grasp when he would otherwise have remained out of reach. You may not wish for my gratitude, but you have it nonetheless."

First Rache, now her. Conscientiousness seemed to be a common trait in the Resistance.

Scáthach turned away. In front of her lay a dozen or so boxes. Hiro opened his mouth to ask what they were, but she beat him to it.

"These hold my family's heads," she said. "Some hardly recognizable as such, but still, all that remains of those I love."

Tears trickled down her cheeks as she brought her hands together and began to pray. From her lips came the same verses that the first archpriestess had

once offered to the Spirit King—a plea for aid intoned through bitter tears, for she had been powerless to heal her countrymen’s battle-scarred hearts or free them from the yoke of the zlostá and, despite her best efforts, the fires of war had only burned brighter by the day.

Once Scáthach had finished praying, Hiro put a question to her—why had she left Liz alive?

“Again you ask? Did I not give my reasons?”

“You did, but they don’t quite add up.”

“Excuse me?”

“In the moment, I connected the dots and convinced myself that they made a line, but now that I look back on it, I’m not so sure. Why go to the trouble of freezing her at all?”

“I thought I told you, a knight does not slay women or children.”

“That’s what’s so strange. If I take that at face value, you must never have had any intention of killing her at all. So why seal her in ice? Your enemies wouldn’t know what to make of it—you’d confuse them more than you’d inflame them. Displaying her wounded and exhausted would have been much more effective.”

Scáthach’s shoulders slumped in defeat. “You must understand,” she said, again looking over her shoulder. “We had our backs against the wall, yet she could have turned the tides for us, and every man in the Resistance knew it. I had to ensure that none could do her harm.”

So she had been acting to protect Liz, not to hurt her. With so many people holding grudges, she could not be assured of Liz’s safety—and as a fellow woman on the battlefield, she doubtless felt doubly motivated to spare her potential humiliation.

“I had meant to release her immediately.”

Hiro’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

“All I demanded in exchange for her safe return was custody of First Prince Stovell and an apology from the emperor.”

After that, she explained, she had meant to capture Fort Mitte and Buze

before securing Aura and Third Prince Brutahl. That was supposed to give her the leverage to negotiate an imperial retreat from Faerzen. However, not only had the emperor sent no apology, he had given no response at all.

“While Lord Puppchen did sit down at the table with Third Prince Brutahl, that was on their own prerogative.”

Hiro cupped his chin in his hand and looked down at the ground, his mind whirling. During his audience at the palace, the emperor had claimed that the Faerzen Resistance had made no demands. Why had the man withheld the truth? There could only be one reason: he had known Hiro would urge him to accept the offer and had been wary of creating a rift between them by refusing it. Nothing short of capitulation to the Resistance would satisfy Hiro, but emperors did not admit to wrongdoing.

And he had other reasons too...

Apprising Hiro of Scáthach’s situation risked persuading him to spare her life out of sympathy—or, worse, to recruit her and her Spiritblade into his ranks. That was why the emperor had kept silent: so as to avoid that outcome. Indeed, he had purposefully divulged as little about Scáthach as possible so that Hiro would not hesitate to cut her down. And if he had known enough to scheme that, he was surely also aware of Liz’s situation. As likely as not, he had contacted High General Vakish and the rest of the border guard prior to Hiro’s arrival at Tutelary Citadel and pressured them into silence.

He acted cooperative enough, but he was pulling the strings behind the scenes all the while. I don’t know whether I should be appalled or impressed.

One thing was certain: Emperor Greiheit was shrewder and more determined than Hiro had imagined. The man might just be his greatest threat.

“Lord Hiro.”

Scáthach’s voice pulled him back to reality. She had fallen to one knee before him and was looking up at him with earnest eyes.

“From this day forth, I will be your spear.” She called Gáe Bolg and raised it above her head, palms up. “A spear to serve your will. A spear to pierce your enemies. A spear to wield against all who would do you harm.”

A vow of service was sealed with the highest ceremony. Acknowledging her grave resolve, Hiro summoned Excalibur into his hand.

“This is only the beginning. The road ahead is long. But I swear, the day will come when I make good on my word.”

A contract. An oath. A binding chain. No one term quite contained what passed between them. Theirs was a vow sworn between spirits. A dazzling light poured forth from their weapons, and the air took on a tangible weight as the spirits within vied to determine which was master.

“Do you swear to deliver me my heart’s desire?”

“I swear to deliver you your heart’s desire.”

“And do you swear that you will not betray your word?”

“I swear that I will fulfill my oath.”

“Then all that I am is yours to wield.”

And so their covenant was sworn—a vow of servitude, and a curse engraved into Scáthach’s very flesh.

Epilogue

Once their oath was done, the pair stood for a while and watched the tent burn.

“They will pay for this someday, I swear it.”

The structure collapsed with a fiery crash. Scáthach looked on, her eyes glistening. Her whisper betrayed a bottomless grief, but Hiro had no intention of offering her comfort. She could walk on her own two feet, and she would not stop until she had her vengeance. It was what came after that worried him. After her revenge had been exacted, he wanted her to find her own path.

But until then, I'll be there to show her the way. And she and Liz will be good for each other.

They were bound to bring out the best in one other, as well as push each other to greater mastery over their Spiritblades.

Scáthach turned her back on the burning tent. “Now I have no regrets. For once, I can leave the past behind.”

“Let's head back to the fort.”

Hiro set out with Scáthach following quietly behind him. Her face was widely recognizable, obliging her to conceal herself with a hood. She would be forced to live a life of secrecy for a while, for which he felt a pang of guilt, but there was nothing else for it.

It'll only be for a short while, anyway.

Previously, he had been focused outward, but from now on, he would turn his gaze inward. Acting too openly would risk alerting his enemies, so he would have to lie low for a while, but little by little he would close the noose until they could no longer escape.

But all that can wait until Liz recovers.

Hiro halted in front of the gate. He could have sworn he had heard a voice,

familiar and warm, but looking around, he could see nothing but soldiers going about their duties. He must have imagined it. A little disappointed, he was about to set off again when he happened to glance up.

“Ha ha. I thought it was about time.”

There she was. The girl he had been waiting to see for so long.

“Hiroooooo!”

The familiar melody he had missed so dearly tickled his ears as it drifted to him on the breeze. She still hadn’t recovered from her wounds, but she climbed up onto the battlements with unsteady steps, wincing occasionally in pain and then gesturing wildly to show that she was all right.

Hiro could only manage a strained grin. Scáthach’s eyes widened in alarm.

“Hiroooooo!”

Liz shouted his name again, and again. By her side, a silver-haired girl was growing increasingly flustered.

Scáthach snorted in amusement. “She has spirit, I’ll give her that.”

“You’ll get along famously.”

Scáthach nodded. “I know I will. We only spoke for a short time, but I feel that I glimpsed her heart.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Now, let’s get going. Hopefully before she falls.”

Hiro set out, light of step, his troubles temporarily forgotten in the face of their long-awaited reunion.



Afterword

Thank you for picking up Volume 4 of *The Mythical Hero's Otherworld Chronicles*. To my returning readers, I hope you've been well these past three months. To anyone starting with Volume 4...is there anyone? Surely not, right? But on the off chance there is, it's a pleasure to meet you.

Now, I'm very aware that three months feels like a long time from a reader's point of view, but now that I'm in the writer's chair, it feels extremely short. Volume 1 can't have gone on sale more than a year ago, and now we're on Volume 4.

The past twelve months have been a roller coaster and went by about as quickly. I could probably fill a respectable novel just recounting my experiences. Seeing my own books for sale on the shelves was a particularly memorable moment from last year, although after that, the run-up to the new year was an overworked blur. I was delighted to receive fan mail after the turn of the year, and I've also been attending parties that I felt very unqualified to be at, although now that I look back, I'm glad I went. It's been a time full of valuable experiences, and if the future holds more of the same I'll have no complaints. You never know what life has in store, though, so I don't want to get too complacent.

Anyway, I'd better get to the thank-yous.

Thank you to Miyuki Ruria-sama, who has brought both my new and returning characters to life in dazzling detail for yet another volume. I always look forward to receiving your roughs. Thank you to my editors, S-sama and D-sama, whom I inconvenienced greatly for the second volume straight. I'm sure this is far from the last time I'll make a nuisance of myself, but I look forward to working together in the future. A heartfelt thank-you to everyone in the editorial department, the proofreaders, the designers, and everybody else who played a part in making this book a reality. My deepest apologies to my coworkers, whom I also caused a great deal of trouble. And, last but not least, thank you

from the bottom of my heart to all of the readers who have stuck with me since the last volume. It's because of you that I've made it this far.

I'll be keeping the chuuni rays on full blast over here, so I hope you'll stick around.

Until then, I hope we meet again.

奉 (Tatematsuri)



**The
Mythical
Hero's
Otherworld
Chronicles**



Tatematsuri / Illust. Miguki Ruria





*That is the
name of your
death.*

*“Held Rey
Schwartz von
Grantz.”*

Bonus Short Stories

The Black Chronicle

On Aura's seventh birthday, her father gifted her a book with a jet-black cover. "Read this," he told her. "It will serve you well."

The name of the book was the Black Chronicle. It did not take much imagination to understand what her father meant. Almost nobody in Aletia bore true, purest black. The hue belonged to one man alone: Held Rey Schwartz von Grantz, the second emperor.

The Hero King of Twinned Black, the arbiter of victory, the wearer of the mask, born to rule the battlefield, a strategist to transcend the world of men. He had many names and many titles, but the greatest of them all was that of Mars, taken on his induction into the Grantzian pantheon. Even in the modern age, the War God commanded overwhelming popularity all across the empire.

"Is it good?"

Perhaps inspired by her house's reputation as a producer of exceptional strategists, by the age of seven, Aura had set her sights on a dream: to become a commander worthy of carving her name into imperial history.

"Very," her father replied. "I can promise you that. I've read through it myself."

Aura peered at the Black Chronicle curiously and cocked her head. "Is this new?" she asked. She had read every book in the house cover to cover and could recite those concerning the War God by heart, but she did not recognize this one.

"Fresh off the presses. It has tales of the War God that you won't find in any prior text, as well as a commendable overview of the tactics he used in battle. I'm sure you'll find it to your liking."

"All right. I'll read it."

Aura dipped her head in a little bow. With a pitter-patter of footsteps, she hurried back to her room. She could hardly contain herself as dove under the covers, and her chest fluttered with anticipation as she cracked open the cover. In the military nation that was the Grantzian Empire, the War God's name was sacred. He was favored, revered, and loved by all.

"Schwartz was amazing..."

Aura, who aspired to be a commander, was no exception. There was no end to Schwartz's inspirational deeds, and his ingenious strategies were too numerous to count.

"Fascinating..."

Even a thousand years later, he retained a captivating power like no other historical figure. His missing years shrouded in mystery, the remaining years devoted to the battlefield, the twists and turns that shaped his journey to the height of glory—no matter which account she read, Aura always finished the last page with the same impression.

"He could have conquered the world."

Perhaps not even Schwartz could have made the Grantzian Empire eternal, but if he had been the first to take the crown, it would certainly be even vaster than it was today.

In any case, Aura's conclusion was simple: "This book is a treasure."

The author's name was not given, but they had a gift for conveying the War God's timeless appeal. She owed her father greatly for the present. No, before that, she owed the War God himself. Without his wondrous feats, the book would never have been written at all.

"Hm?"

She glanced out of the window. Darkness was setting in.

"Just one more time."

The afterglow of the reading deserved to be basked in just a while longer. Besides, she was far too excited to sleep. Naturally, "just one more time" lasted until morning. In the end, she read the Black Chronicle cover to cover for three

days straight, and only a furious scolding from her mother stopped it from becoming four.

* * * * *

“And the Black Chronicle has been like a part of me ever since,” Aura finished.

Could anybody in the world hear a story like that and not blush? If so, they weren’t Hiro. He covered his ears and hid his face, assailed by an indescribable embarrassment.

A small palm smacked the top of his head. “Are you listening?”

He looked back up to see Aura’s leaden eyes looking slightly miffed. “Uh...I got that you’re a fan of the second emperor, at any rate.”

She shook her head furiously, waving her palms in front of her face. “I’m not a *fan*. I *love* him.” Her hands clenched into determined little fists. With her face as expressionless as ever, it was hard to be certain how serious she really was, but in any case, that wasn’t a confession to make in front of Emperor Schwartz himself.

“You should read it.” Aura thrust the Black Chronicle out in front of her.

Hiro would rather have been tortured than read a tell-all account of his own past, but he didn’t want to disappoint the starry-eyed girl in front of him. After a moment’s hesitation, he took the book. He would simply have to grit his teeth and bear the cringing.

“Make notes. There will be a test.”

A wordless scream left Hiro’s mouth as he was stricken with sudden despair.

Claudia’s Ambition

“Kneel.”

The word, imperiously spoken, pierced the man’s chest like a blade.

Three months prior, Claudia’s brother, Prince Flaus, had slain the king and attempted to seize control of Lebering. The man now standing before her, grimacing in pain, had commanded the rebel forces in the royal city. Ultimately,

the coup had failed—with the aid of Fourth Prince Hiro Schwartz of the Grantzian Empire, the then-Princess Claudia had brought Flaus’s ill-laid schemes down around his ears and taken the throne for herself. Both her brother and the man who had manipulated him had perished in the final battle. All that now remained of the rebellion was the prisoner before her eyes.

“I’ll never bow my head to a witch like you,” he spat.

“My. That is unfortunate.” Claudia’s faint smile betrayed not a hint of disappointment.

The scope of her authority had swelled greatly over the past three months, with little resistance. Her preparations had been long in the making, of course, but it helped that her father’s retainers had been too witless to see what was happening until it was far too late.

“But if you do not show me due respect, your house will suffer the consequences. Your wife and child will be turned out onto the streets, if not worse. If you wish me to extend them royal protection, you must kneel.”

Claudia paused in lifting fruit from her lady-in-waiting’s bowl to lick the juice from her fingers, then looked back with a lascivious smile. Her soldiers, her officials, even the shackled man couldn’t help but stare, so potent was her allure.

“Your head will still be forfeit, of course. An example must be set.”

After he was dead, she would take the rest of his house under her wing. They would likely despise her at first, but with a little sincerity and time to indoctrinate them—*persuade* them, she mentally corrected herself—as to the justness of her actions, their anger would cool to loyalty. With appropriate application of the carrot and the stick, anyone could be convinced of anything.

“Do you give your word that my family will not be harmed?” the man asked.

“But of course. You are the one on trial. They are blameless in this matter.” With the merciful smile of a Madonna, Claudia laid a hand upon her chest and swore upon Lebering’s great founder, Lox.

That seemed to convince the man. He pressed his forehead to the floor. “I and I alone was the instigator,” he cried. “For the crime of inviting disorder into

Lebering—into your nation, Your Highness—I accept my life as forfeit.” Head still bowed, his voice trembled as his lips tightened with remorse. “I have no right to ask anything of you, but I prevail upon your mercy to spare my family.”

“Very well. In view of your sincere confession, I will grant your request. I swear upon my name as queen that your loved ones will come to no harm.”

“You are most gracious, Your Highness!”

“Now take him to the scaffold.”

At Claudia’s command, the soldiers holding the man in place began to drag him away.

With his execution, the last seed of rebellion would be plucked. Soon would come a formal coronation, the reconstruction of the south, the strengthening of the military, negotiations with foreign powers. The public business of rulership would be attended to quickly and discreetly. Meanwhile, in the shadows, espionage and bribes to powerful nobles across the continent would shore up Lebering’s strength. To fool the gaze of the Grantzian Empire would be an extraordinarily difficult task, but fortunately, she had already set her eyes on a willing collaborator.

And collaborate you will, Lord Hiro. So long as our interests align, we are bound to one another.

The zlosta had lived in suffering and shame for a thousand long years. If they were ever to see the sun again, she could afford to balk at nothing. Let the world mock her; let it spit on her; but in the name of preserving her people’s legacy, she would make her meager mark on history.

Lox’s dream will be realized under my reign. This I swear.

Someday, Lebering would join the voices proclaiming rule across the continent—and on that day, the world would remember the terror and might of the zlosta.

Claudia rose to her feet, the flame of idealism raging in her eyes. “This hearing is hereby concluded,” she announced. “I will return to my chambers.”

She had much and more to do. Every minute, every second was precious.

There was no time for leisure; there was no time for sloth. She would be swifter than anyone, sooner than anyone, better than anyone—and she would claim supremacy.

My ambitions have only just begun.

Letters to the Archpriestess

The Spirit King's sanctum was, as its name implied, the temple wherein the Spirit King was enshrined. In its deepest recesses, priestesses-in-training labored night and day to become worthy of the rank of knight-priestess. Forbidden to men, some called it a garden of the feminine; others called it the closest thing to paradise in this misbegotten world.

The archpriestess, speaker for the sanctum, was accompanied at all times by an armed escort whose diligence ensured that she came to no harm. Two such guards attended her today as she visited to encourage the trainees.

The woman heaved a troubled sigh as she watched the squires train. Her two guards glanced at one another. While she normally attended to her duties with diligence and grace, for the past two days she had been taken by a strange mood.

"What's that all about?" the more fiery of the guards asked.

"Haven't you noticed?" the more reserved one replied. "Recently, Her Holiness has thought of nothing but the Black Prince."

"Lord Hiro, you mean? That boy who stayed here once?"

"The very same. They have been exchanging letters ever since. It seems his most recent response has been delayed, hence her distress."

The fiery knight-priestess massaged her forehead, feeling a headache coming on. "To the point that it interferes with her duties? So even Her Holiness has a maiden's heart..."

"Imagine having the luxury of neglecting letters that the whole continent would kill for the chance to send."

"You can say that again. So? How long's he kept her waiting?"

If memory served, the Black Prince was stationed at Berg Fortress to the south. A courier could reach him in two days. Even if he had been at a loss for what to write, a response should only have taken three or four days, certainly no more than a week.

“Six days, I hear. I wouldn’t be surprised if his reply came before today was out.”

“How long do they usually take?”

“No more than four. You can tell when they come—Her Holiness spends the day positively glowing. I don’t know how you could have missed it.”

“Should we send a messenger? Order him to hurry up?”

The reserved knight-priestess grimaced at the thought. “Only if you want to invite Her Holiness’s fury. Besides, those of our station cannot make demands of imperial royalty. We’d lose our heads.”

The fiery knight-priestess cocked her head. “You think so? The Black Prince didn’t strike me as the sort. I think he’d let us off with a slap on the wrist and a grin.”

“Or we could keep our mouths shut and let this resolve itself. I think that’s wiser, don’t you?”

The fiery knight-priestess sighed. “Sits ill with me knowing her troubles and doing nothing to help, that’s all.”

At that moment, another knight-priestess came running from the entrance to the training ground. “Your Holiness!” she cried. “Lord Hiro’s letter has arrived!”

As the two guards turned to see the archpriestess’s reaction, a great gust of wind sent their hair flying.

“What the—!”

“Wah!”

They scrambled to secure the archpriestess’s safety, but she had vanished.

“Curse it! Where’s she gone?!”

“Could that have been a monster? But what could snatch her up so quickly?”

They scanned their surroundings frantically. Eventually, both of them spotted the same thing, and both of their mouths fell open as one.

“Eek! When did you get there?!”

A scream rose from the newly arrived knight-priestess as she noticed the archpriestess standing directly behind her. The archpriestess all but snatched the letter from her grasp and laid her other hand on it tenderly, a smile spreading across her face. Then, abruptly, she turned on her heel and set off briskly toward the entrance.

“Your Holiness?! Where are you going?!”

“Come back, Your Holiness! You are supposed to be under our supervision!”

The archpriestess stopped and looked back as her two wardens shouted after her.

“But I must send Lord Hiro my reply!”

“Is it urgent?” the fiery knight-priestess asked.

“Oh, yes. Very much so.”

“What did he say?”

“He inquired as to my favorite food. With so many options, however shall I decide?”

“Pardon?”

The fiery knight-priestess stopped in her tracks, blinking dumbly. The archpriestess was already dashing away down the corridor, her duties forgotten.

“Your Holiness, wait! What of the trainees?!”

Shouts followed her, but she paid them no heed. When it came to love, even the bearer of the Far Sight was blind.

The Black Hand Rides

The time when the races of Aletia vied for supremacy was a savage one. The

strong endured and the rest were ground into the muck. Death was a fact of life in that violent age, feeding the ever-growing maelstrom of hatred that swirled over the continent.

This was a battlefield—a hellish extreme that permitted not a moment's misstep. A hundred thousand men clashed with a hundred thousand more, and every time steel sang, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of lives were spilled across the land. The collision of conviction meeting conviction shook the air and nigh on split the earth.

"Hah! What say you?! Have I not trained my men well?!"

Atop a towering cliff with a commanding view of the field, a man watched the armies crash together with a delighted grin.

"Sloppy," a second man said. "Strength without finesse is the domain of beasts. Humans ought to use the brains they're born with." He tapped his brow to illustrate the point.

"Humans, is it, Lox? Odd choice of words for a fiendkin."

Lox didn't rise to the bait. "You ought to curb that temper of yours, Roylicht. The battlefield makes no distinction between human and zlosta."

"Does it bollocks. I'll pray to the Spirit King that none of your soldiers make it back, how about that?!"

"You speak like a child. My troops are not so frail."

As the two glared at one another, a third figure approached them, whistling. "My, my. You two ought to get along better or you'll make the old man mad again."

"Quiet, you freak," Roylicht growled.

"Keep your distance, Amphibia. That form of yours disgusts me."

The androgynous individual called Amphibia fixed the pair with a pouty glare. "You're such meanies! What did I ever do to— Oof!"

"Stop your simpering. It makes my fists itch."

"Perhaps next time you should warn before you punch," Lox said, although his

eyes urged Roylicht to continue.

“How cruel... What did I do to deserve that?” Hand pressed coquettishly to cheek, Amphibia stared at the pair with watery eyes. Both stepped back three paces, revolted.

“How often do I have to tell you youngins? Distraction is death on the battlefield.” A hoarse voice rang out as an old, white-haired man approached the trio, his slow steps aided by a staff.

“Only sometimes.” A black-haired, black-eyed boy stepped out from behind the elderly man and patted him on the shoulder. “Shows of confidence might not set a good example for the troops, but they do reassure them.”

“I tell you, Lord Schwartz, you’re too soft on these striplings. You’ve got them thinking they’re invincible.”

“And you’re a little too harsh. Why not ease off just for today? The Black Hand is together once more. Isn’t that a reason for celebration?” The boy named Schwartz crossed in front of his subordinates, strode comfortably to the edge of the cliff, and peered down. After a moment, he turned back with a grin. “Now, to business. Your men are all fighting admirably, but they can’t quite win the day. So, a question. How can we keep this battle from falling into a deadlock?”

The four commanders frowned back at him, caught off guard.

The old man was the first to speak. “Are you proposing committing our core and finishing the enemy yourself?”

Schwartz shook his head. “Not quite. It’s true that a new player is needed, but it won’t be me.”

The old man was the first to realize what he meant, followed by Amphibia and Lox.

“Oopsie. Then I’d best rejoin my men. Bye, Lord Schwartz!”

“I too shall take my leave.”

The two hurried away, leaving behind a confused Roylicht.

“Where are they going?! What’s gotten into them?”

Schwartz raised a finger. “Look over there and you’ll understand.”

Roylicht followed. In the distance, an army had skirted around the enemy and was now approaching them from the rear. His eyes bulged as he saw the banner they carried.

“Meteia?! Blast it, talk about stealing glory!”

He, too, hurried from the cliff.

Schwartz’s smile deepened as he watched the three leave. It was then that he realized the old man had not moved.

“Aren’t you going to join them?” he asked.

“No, no. I am quite content to watch younger men fight these battles.” He paused. “The Black Hand, is it? Quite the name we’ve been furnished with.”

“Artheus does love his titles,” Schwartz remarked.

“He’s wasted this one on those striplings, if you ask me.”

“They’ll need a name people can remember. In time, the whole world will know it.”

Eventually, all of Aletia would tremble before the War God and his Black Hand. Their flame might be small now, but soon they would sweep across the land like the fiery rays of the rising sun.

A Thousand-Year Bond

The fifteenth day of the eighth month of Pholus 204, more than a thousand years before the present day

A flick of his wrist sent ten heads rolling; a swing of his arm sent one hundred heads flying. One word from his lips could ruin a nation; one flash of his fangs could topple a hundred. Unbelievable though it may sound, such was the might of Leon Welt Artheus von Grantz, the Lionheart, beloved of the Spirit King—and the man who would be known in the world to come as Zertheus, the First God.

The air was muggy with humidity as Artheus arrived at the retreat.

“Curse this heat a thousand times! From whence does it spring?!”

Complaining like a boy half his age, the golden-haired, golden-eyed youth sprang down from his carriage. That was no figure of speech—he leapt straight out of the moving vehicle, landed gracefully, and tossed aside his luxurious, gold-threaded cloak. Heedless of dirtying his clothes, he stripped his muscular torso bare. His fine-featured face contorted as he glared up at the sun.

“Come, then!” he yelled. “Face me! I’ll drag you down to earth and teach you a lesson!”

For all that he was king of his nation and powerful enough to make those around him bend the knee, the heat seemed to have addled his wits.

As Artheus yelled his anti-sun tirade to the sky, his carriage raised a cloud of dust as it screeched to a stop nearby. A black-haired boy disembarked and watched his comrade’s antics with a slightly pained expression.

“You do realize that would burn the planet up, don’t you?” he called out.

He was Held Rey Schwartz von Grantz, the renowned Hero King of Twinned Black. It had been his singular tactical acumen that had saved Artheus’s kingdom from destruction, and it had been he who had freed humankind from the yoke of the zlostas. In the world to come, he would be known as the War God and beloved by soldiers and peasants alike—but for now, he had accomplished no deeds worthy of that honor, and the world did not yet know his name.

“How can you be so composed?! Are you not hot? Surely you must be! A retreat, they called this place, and to my face! A retreat from what?! The heat is as bad here as anywhere else!”

“It is,” Schwartz said, “but I can put up with it.”

“Now there’s the brother I know. When the women all squeal about the frosty Lord Schwartz every time you walk the streets, I assume that’s what they mean.” Artheus’s eyes were cold, and there was a hint of jealousy in his voice.

Schwartz gave a forced laugh and shrugged. “You always make such weird assumptions. I promise you, no one’s squealing over me.”

“You lie, brother. I have watched with my own eyes as commoner girls forced love letters into your hands.”

“Well...okay, maybe that happens sometimes.”

“I, the king himself, receive only endless proposals for political unions, while my brother dallies with the townsfolk and leaves me all the paperwork. It hardly seems fair.”

“If you don’t like the arrangement, I’d be happy to swap places.”

Although Schwartz had spoken in jest, Artheus’s eyes narrowed sharply, like a hawk that had caught sight of its prey. What gleamed within them was neither anger nor scorn, but earnest hope. Perhaps the heat had confused his judgment, but he seemed to have taken the offer seriously.

“If you wished it,” he said, “I would yield the kingship in an instant.”

“No, that’s not what I...” Taken aback, Schwartz struggled for words.

“My country would be a smoking ruin if not for you, and I would lie dead. My crown is a trifle next to the debt I owe. I would give it gladly.”

Schwartz suddenly felt certain that if he said yes, Artheus would yield the kingship the very next day. He would bully any opponents into silence, convince the people through strength of will—whatever was necessary, he would see it done.

“I appreciate the offer, but...”

Artheus snorted. A grin spread across his face as he wrapped an arm around Schwartz’s shoulders. “A jest, brother. Forgive my tasteless humor.”

“I should be the one to apologize,” Schwartz said. “I shouldn’t have joked about that.”

“Think nothing of it. More to the point...” With a white grin, Artheus flung his weight onto Schwartz’s back. “I am exhausted. You must carry me to the mansion!”

“What are you talking about?! Walk there yourself!”

“I refuse! Carry me! Your king commands it!”

“Stop that! Get off me, idiot!”

Blood runs thicker than water, they said, and so the difference between blood

relatives and others was like heaven and earth. If so, the bond between Schwartz and Artheus surely ran thicker than any blood.

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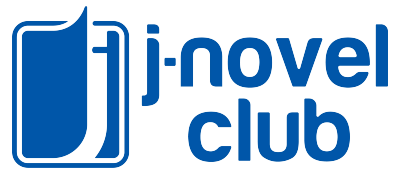
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The Mythical Hero's Otherworld Chronicles: Volume 4

by Tatematsuri

Translated by James Whittaker Edited by Tess Nanavati

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